

James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States,
1928–38

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James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1928–38

By

Bryan D. Palmer



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This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

*For Mike Davis, story-teller extraordinaire,
a militant's militant historian;
&
For Ernie Tate, 'defender of old positions' and
a fighter for new ones*



“Bryan Palmer’s biography of James Cannon is a brilliant, lucidly and compellingly written *tour de force*. Palmer has taken the life of the leader of a small, seemingly obscure US revolutionary organization to shed light not only on US oppositional politics, but on the deepest currents of US, North American, and world history. This is an essential primer for all who have an interest in radical labor and social movements across the globe.”

MICHAEL GOLDFIELD, author, most recently, of *The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s*

• • •

“The second volume of Bryan Palmer’s study of James P. Cannon, a founder of Trotskyism in the United States, is a crucial contribution to our understanding of revolutionary politics in the 1930s. It grapples with both Cannon’s political and organizational strengths and weaknesses, providing an essential addition to the history of the global and US mobilizations of the left and their relations with the ongoing struggles of working people.”

CHARLES POST, author of *The American Road to Capitalism* member of the editorial board of *Spectre: A Marxist Journal*

• • •

“James P. Cannon has found the perfect biographer in Bryan Palmer, the accomplished historian of the international working class. Palmer’s detailed account of the American Left Opposition’s break from the Stalinized Communist International in 1928-38 exposes the violent lengths to which the Communist Party, USA, would go to suppress critics on the left, as well as deftly demonstrating how Cannon, its leading figure, intervened in the titanic labor struggles and other events of the tumultuous 1930s. Impressively researched, this is a profound work of scholarship that is simultaneously a riveting narrative. You can’t put it down.”

SUZI WEISSMAN, author of *Victor Serge: A Political Biography*, longtime radio broadcaster, and co-producer of a Trotsky documentary, “The Most Dangerous Man in the World”

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Contents

Preface and Acknowledgments XI

List of Figures XX

Introduction: James P. Cannon and the ‘Prince’s Favors’ 1

- 1 Hope and the Dog Days 2
- 2 Historiography’s House of Mirrors 10
- 3 Mirror Image Refusals 16
- 4 Analytic Alternative 34
- 5 Cannon and the History of American Trotskyism 46

1 An American Left Opposition 51

- 1 Exile off Main Street 51
- 2 Stalinism Consolidating 56
- 3 Stalinist Slow Dancing: Guile 60
- 4 Picking up the Pace: Gangsterism 72
- 5 Recruiting the American Left Opposition: Three Phases 97
- 6 Cannon: Caretaker of the Original Left Opposition Cadre 98
- 7 Recruitment’s Second Phase: Stalinism’s Heavy Hand 113
- 8 ‘An Army of a Million People’: Hungarians, Italians, Finns, and Immigrant Birth Controllers 118
- 9 A Publication Program 125
- 10 The Founding of the Communist League of America (Opposition) 133

2 Dog Days 157

- 1 Downturn: Economic Depression 157
- 2 ‘Left Turn’: Revolutionary Politics and the Third Period 169
- 3 Dimensions of Cannon’s Crisis: Material Being 178
- 4 Dimensions of Cannon’s Crisis: Reconstituted Families and Domestic Complications 181
- 5 Dimensions of Cannon’s Crisis: Rose Karsner’s Break-Down 186
- 6 Cannon’s Collapsing World: The Personal Becomes Political 191
- 7 The Weisbord Whirlwind 212
- 8 Branch Bickerings: New York Cliquism and Youth Recruits 225
- 9 Factional Waystation: June 1932, National Committee Plenum 240
- 10 Factionalism Internationalized: The Turn to Europe 256
- 11 International Intervention 287

12	Dog Days Denouement: New Turns	300
13	Internal Ironies	304
3	Daylight: Analysis and Action	312
1	1933–34: Past, Present, and Future	312
2	Context: Revival/Reorientation	314
3	The Long and Trying March <i>Back</i> to a Labor Party Perspective	324
4	Black Oppression in America: National Self-Determination vs. The Revolutionary Struggle for Equality	337
5	The Momentum of Mobilizations: Unemployed and Labor Defense Work	379
6	Miner Militants: Cannon's ' <i>Bona Fide</i> Proletarians'	407
7	B.J. Field: A Napoleon among New York's French Chefs	461
8	Dawn of a New Left Opposition Day	487
4	Minneapolis Militants	507
1	General Strike	507
2	Class Relations in Minneapolis	521
3	Trotskyists among the Teamsters: Propagandistic Old Moles	528
4	January Thaw; February Cold Snap: The Coal Yards on Strike	539
5	Lessons of the Coal Yards Strike	545
6	Strike Preparations: Unemployed Agitations and Industrial Unionism	547
7	Overcoming 'Bureaucratic Obstacles'	557
8	The Ladies'/Women's Auxiliary	559
9	Rebel Outpost: 1900 Chicago Avenue	565
10	The <i>Tribune</i> Alley Plot and the Battle of Deputies Run	568
11	May 1934: Settlement Secured; Victory Postponed	584
12	Stalinist Slurs	596
13	Farmer-Labor Two Class Hybrid vs. Class Struggle Perspective	602
14	Interlude	606
15	Toward the July Days	612
16	A Strike Declared; A Plot Exposed	623
17	Bloody Friday	629
18	Labor's Martyr: Henry B. Ness	639
19	Martial Law/Red Scare	645
20	Olson: The Defective 'Merits' of a Progressive Pragmatism	655
21	Standing Fast: Satire and Solidarity	660
22	Mediation's Meanderings	667
23	Sudden and Unexpected Victory	671

5 Entryism 691

- 1 1934: Militancy and Marginalization's Movement 691
- 2 The French Turn 697
- 3 Cannon, Trotsky, and the Preparatory Ground of Entryism:
Transcending the 'Organic Unity' Imbroglia 705
- 4 Fusion with the Musteites 721
- 5 Building the Party amid Fusion's Fallout 752
- 6 Anticipating the French Turn 763
- 7 Americanizing the French Turn: Factions and Combinations 770
- 8 The Intensification of Oehlerite Sectarianism 777
- 9 Ousting the Oehlerites 787
- 10 Socialist Party Schisms and Workers Party Entry 815
- 11 Prelude to Entry: Cannon in Harness and Muste's Conversions 833
- 12 Entryism & Subordination 851
- 13 A Farmer-Labor Detour and the Return of the Oehlerite
Repressed 860
- 14 Entry Proclaimed 867
- 15 Cannon in California: The 'Foot Loose Rebel' and the Agitational
Road 871
- 16 Entryist Estrangement 886
- 17 The Return of the Prodigal Agitator 903
- 18 Reaction from Above 920
- 19 The End of Entry 927
- 20 Assessing the French Turn in America 933

6 Trials, Tragedies, and Trade Unions 947

- 1 1937's Imperative: Assimilating Revolution's Recruits 947
- 2 The Origins of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon
Trotsky 952
- 3 The Non-partisan Origins of Trotsky's Defense 958
- 4 Dancing with Dewey 965
- 5 Trotsky's Testimony 984
- 6 Carleton Beals and Stalinism at Work in the Preliminary
Sub-commission 988
- 7 Delimitation by Default 992
- 8 Social-Democratic Delimitation 1008
- 9 Brand Barcelona on Centrist Foreheads: Trotskyism and the Spanish
Civil War 1014
- 10 Trotskyism Finds its 'Sea Legs': Cannon and the Maritime Federation
of the Pacific 1034

- 11 Frame-Up in Minneapolis: Who Killed Patrick J. Corcoran? 1052
- 12 Trotskyism on the Line: Footholds in Mass Production and the
CIO 1077

Conclusion: Party/International 1117

Selected References 1155

Index 1191

Preface and Acknowledgments

This is a long book about a relatively short span of time, the decade 1928–38. In the history of United States class relations, in general, as well as in the development of the American revolutionary left, in particular, these were years of decisive importance. What follows is centered on one individual, James Patrick Cannon, whose life in the years leading from his 1890 birth in the working-class hamlet of Rosedale, Kansas, to his 1928 expulsion from the Communist Party he helped to found I have traced in a previous book.¹ As the title for this volume suggests, *James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1928–38* is about the making of a revolutionary movement as much as it is about an individual historical figure.

Some explanations are in order with respect to the organization of this study. I opted to present the material in a roughly chronological fashion, at the same time as I structured the narrative around critical topical considerations. This inevitably produced some overlap, with subjects mentioned in one chapter being more fully discussed in a later section. Thus a topic such as the Spanish Civil War may appear to receive short shrift when initially introduced, but receives fuller treatment as the book unfolds.

James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1928–38 divides at the mid-point of 1933–34. This marks both a break in the international orientation of the Left Opposition and a qualitative leap into a different kind of practical engagement with American workers. In 1933, the Communist League of America (Opposition), known as the CLA or the League, along with the entire International Left Opposition, abandoned attempts to reverse the course of the Communist International [Comintern/CI]. The American Trotskyists who broke from this Moscow-based Third International ceased considering themselves a political tendency seeking to win the members of the Communist Party USA away from what Cannon and others considered their defeatist course. Codified with the 1928 adoption of a program of “Socialism in One Country,” the Comintern’s orientation, imposed on all Communist parties affiliated with the now unmistakably Stalinized International, abandoned the longstanding Marxist advocacy of World Revolution in favor of pursuing policies that supposedly secured the survival of socialism inside the Soviet Union. Evidence of the costly consequences of this strategic reversal

1 Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

and the ongoing degeneration of the once-revolutionary Soviet Union and the Communist International it led mounted over the course of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Trotsky's Left Opposition challenged Stalin's policies, including the Comintern's disastrous suppression of working-class initiative in the Chinese Revolution of 1925–27. Stalin, resisting what he labeled a “premature” proletarian uprising, aligned with Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese national bourgeoisie, resulting in the suppression of a revolutionary situation, in which general strikes were crushed and thousands of communist workers executed.

It was not until fascism's European advances of the early 1930s, however, that Trotsky and his followers determined to break decisively from the Stalinized leadership of the Comintern, realizing that it could not be won back to a revolutionary program. The catalyst for this turn away from the Third International was the failure of the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union and the Comintern that it controlled to mobilize the powerful German Communist and workers' movements against Hitler's rise to power. As the tragedy of this abstentionism unraveled in 1933, with fascism's threat to humanity and determination to crush all vestiges of working-class self-activity obvious, Trotsky was forced to conclude reluctantly that the Communist International was now dead as any sort of revolutionary instrument. The corollary was to launch a new Fourth International, and to build national sections and parties that would affiliate with it.

This untethering of the International Left Opposition [ILO] freed Trotskyists to pursue courses of agitation and mobilization that had been difficult if not impossible in the years from 1928–33, when its advocates (most of whom had been expelled from Comintern-affiliated Communist parties) considered themselves an external faction dedicated to righting the course of the Soviet-aligned forces of Bolshevism. Within the United States, the 1934 teamster strikes represented by far the most successful example of Trotskyist mass work to date. This achievement provided a model for how revolutionaries could lead workers in class struggles, and helped to launch a wider mobilization of a vibrant industrial unionism, the most heralded expression of which would be the Congress of Industrial Organizations [CIO].

Prior to these developments, from 1928–33, Cannon and his co-thinkers in the CLA largely focused on disseminating Trotsky's critical analyses of global developments with a particular accent on the betrayal of revolutionary principles by Stalin and criticism of the increasingly repressive bureaucratic apparatus he headed. The opening chapters of this book outline the establishment of an American Left Opposition and how it was assailed and attacked by former comrades in the Communist Party USA (Chapter 1). Marginalized and isolated, Trotskyists throughout the world faced difficult circumstances in the late

1920s and early 1930s. This nurtured personal recriminations, factionalism, and opportunistic tendencies throughout the ILO that threatened to capsize the movement, nowhere moreso than in the United States (Chapter 2). A youthful cohort of Cannon supporters – of whom Max Shachtman was perhaps the most significant – broke from their old factional leader of Communist Party days, leaving the League awash in cliquish accusations and acrimony that would only dissipate incompletely and with difficulty. Cannon and his Left Opposition comrades managed to weather these storms, and in the depths of dog days' difficulties they charted new ways of applying Marxism to the awkward realities of American experience. They rethought how communists should approach the vexing question of race and class, known at the time as "the Negro Question." Agitations among coal miners in Illinois and the significant role of Trotskyist cadre in the leadership of a militant hotel workers' strike in New York showed that new forays in class-struggle politics were achievable, even in the depths of the Great Depression (Chapter 3). The Minneapolis teamsters' strikes, the highpoint of this activity within the trade unions, signaled a breakthrough into entirely new realms of possibility for American Trotskyism (Chapter 4).

The remainder of this book, and the history it is concerned with, turns on taking the gains realized and consolidated over the 1928–34 years and turning them to the purpose of building organizations capable of extending the politics of revolutionary socialism, both in the United States and around the world. The path to the creation of the Socialist Workers Party [SWP] and the Fourth International [FI] ran through a series of sharp debates, out of which grew fusions, splits, and entries. Cannon's role in all of this was often decisive. From a merger with A.J. Muste's American Workers Party through the entry into the Socialist Party, Cannon helped to orchestrate a significant expansion of the ranks of revolutionary Trotskyists. He also confronted Hugo Oehler and other former close associates when they refused to participate in building the bridges that were key to achieving dramatic organizational advances. These critical initiatives are presented as a distinct *internal* history in a chapter ordered by the tempestuous struggles within the Trotskyist movement as it worked to establish the foundations of a mass revolutionary party in the United States (Chapter 5). This intra-Trotskyist orchestration of fusions, splits, and entries took place in the context of Trotskyist activities in the wider world. Notable among them were the establishment of a Mexican tribunal, chaired by John Dewey, to counter the slanders and misinformation of the Moscow Trials; advocacy of a politics of revolutionary support for and engagement with the insurgents of the Spanish Civil War; and the development of class-struggle tactics and strategy for work in the trade unions. In all of these endeavors, Trotskyists in the United States continued to create alternatives to Stalinist maneuvers and machinations, devel-

oping the arsenal of revolutionary politics (Chapter 6). This book concludes with the 1938 establishment of the Socialist Workers Party and the creation of a revolutionary Fourth International, two milestones in which James P. Cannon played a critically important role.

How Trotskyism arrived in the United States and what it accomplished in its formative years is not a story that has preoccupied many historians. There have been few studies of Trotskyism in the United States, and some of them have been poorly done, as outlined in the introduction below. This has unfortunately allowed the working-class history of a pivotal decade, the 1930s, to be overwhelmingly concerned with the larger and more influential Stalinized Communist movement, a focus which has resulted in routinely excusing much and bypassing a great deal.

One reason for the detail in this study is to counter this interpretive tilt, expressed in the complex, seemingly contradictory, historiographic stands discussed in the introduction to this volume. These warring interpretive positions generally place the Trotskyist movement on the historical sidelines, and this has decisive implications. A study of Cannon's life, and the movement and Party he contributed so much to building and sustaining, illuminates aspects of history too long obscured. Aside from the intrinsic importance of outlining this experience, there are at least four ways in which focusing on Cannon to outline Trotskyism's significance in the history of United States radicalism provides a new perspective on issues of concern to both historians and activists of the left.

First, this history reveals the red thread of continuity between early twentieth-century radicalism native to the USA – epitomized by the Industrial Workers of the World and a segment of the Left-Wing of the Socialist Party – and the Communist movement inspired by the Russian Revolution. Cannon considered himself to be a Wobbly who learned from the world-historic events associated with 1917. This brought him to Marxism, the theory of working-class revolution, and internationalism. Cannon's story, as much as the life course of any other individual on the American left, shows how revolutionary politics *could* develop in the world's most advanced capitalist nation. Nothing in Cannon's history is more striking than his ability to retain an acute sensitivity to the particular experiences of Americans, while appreciating the significance of major historical events beyond the borders of the United States.

Second, Cannon's life is a repudiation of the idea that American communism was always, and could only be, dominated by slavish adherence to Moscow's directives. As I discuss in commentary on the historiography of the Communist Party, Stalinization did mean that Moscow exercised a decisive influence over its American followers. The history of US communism cannot be analyzed rigorously without attending to how the Communist International controlled

and colored the policy and practice of its adherents in the United States, be they leading cadre or rank-and-file militants. Cannon was an American radical who rightly valued the guidance provided by leading Bolshevik figures such as Lenin, Zinoviev, and Trotsky to the fledgling Communist movement in the United States. When it became apparent that the Comintern was subordinating struggles in other countries, such as the United States, to its own ends, leading those who opposed capitalism into positions destined to derail the possibility of revolutionary advances, Cannon was prepared to break from Moscow and its leadership. This was a confirmation of his grasp of the pivotal importance of socialist internationalism and his refusal to collapse the communist project into the limitations and defeatist logic of "Socialism in One Country."

Third, Cannon's history in the late 1920s and 1930s, when engaged with substantively, suggests that writing on the Communist Party must confront Stalinization, which qualitatively transformed the nature of life in what was a leading United States organization of the ostensible revolutionary left. Among the troubling features of Stalinization was thuggery and violent responses to political opponents on the left that had previously been largely unknown among revolutionaries. The clash of Stalinism and Trotskyism was, to be sure, a fundamental disagreement over programmatic issues, in which "Socialism in One Country" and its inclination toward short-term pragmatic shifts in policy was counter-posed to the historic imperatives of revolutionary internationalism upon which the Communist International was founded. What followed in the wake of this conceptual and political divide, however, was ghastly. Cannon and his comrades in the original American Left Opposition experienced some ugly situations as CPers attacked their meetings and threatened them physically. Yet, many of these same Party members also played heroic roles in a variety of struggles for social justice, including highly significant anti-racist mobilizations. Moscow-aligned Communists were often among the most talented and dedicated organizers of vibrant campaigns to build militant industrial unionism. Fighting to advance working-class interests, they led struggles of the unemployed and actively built combative picket lines and sustained activist innovations, like the flying squadrons and sit-downs of striking workers that worked to such good effect during the class conflicts of the Great Depression. The Stalinization of the American Communist movement was thus a complex process, in which many self-sacrificing, self-identified revolutionaries combined honorable acts with repugnant ones. Its political weight was evident in the adventurism and sectarianism of the Third Period of the late 1920s and early 1930s, as well as in the subsequent turn to the class collaborationism of the Popular Front. The latter, Trotsky alleged, was centrally responsible for the defeat of the Spanish revolutionary upsurge. There were also the

calumnies of the Moscow Trials, which Trotsky's American followers played a central role in combatting.

Fourth, and finally, a study of Cannon in the years 1928–38 establishes that when revolutionaries adhere to principled politics, even in difficult circumstances, it is possible to make considerable headway. Given the relatively small numbers that rallied to Trotsky's banner in the US between 1928 and 1938, their achievements were rather remarkable. They won some huge trade union victories; successfully combatted sectarianism and opportunism, both in their own ranks and in the broader workers' movement; and provided a lucid critique of the ways in which Stalinism undermined the politics of revolution. In fusions and entries involving other subjectively revolutionary elements in 1934–37, America's Trotskyists, with Cannon at their head, rapidly expanded their capacity to provide leadership in struggles against capitalist exploitation and oppression. All of this happened, moreover, as Trotskyists in the United States were often divided against themselves with respect to many questions.

As fraught as relations were at many points between Cannon and his comrades, however, no other national section of the nascent Fourth International contributed nearly as much to its founding, as Trotsky recognized. His "Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International," often known as *The Transitional Program*, served as the founding document of the new International. It drew on the experiences of Trotskyists in the United States, and was in part shaped by discussions Trotsky had with Cannon, Max Shachtman, Rose Karsner, and Vincent Ray Dunne – all founders of the American Left Opposition and the Socialist Workers Party – in Mexico in March 1938.

In embarking on a study of James P. Cannon, I faced a daunting task, for the archival and other primary sources available to the historian of the American Left Opposition and its successors in the various organizations that preceded the launching of the Socialist Workers Party in 1938 are voluminous. Archives and archivists to which I owe particular debts include: the Tamiment Institute, Bobst Library, New York University, where Peter Filardo, Dorothy Swanson, and Andrew Lee were generous with their help; the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and Harold L. Miller, who guided me through use of the extensive James P. Cannon-Rose Karsner Papers; Wayne State University Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library; Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library; and the United States Justice Department, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Freedom of Information/Privacy Acts Section.

At the Prometheus Research Library, in New York City, the late Diana B. Karsten, Emily Turnbull, Alison Dundy, James Robertson, and Jacob Zumoff have gone out of their way to advance my research on Cannon. They have all read portions of this book and provided suggestions and criticisms, improving it sig-

nificantly. I am extremely grateful for their help and shared commitment to the rigorous study of American Trotskyism.

My extensive work in the Cannon-Karsner Papers was facilitated by Jack Barnes who, when I began researching this study more than 25 years ago, was the owner of the copyrights in and to the James P. Cannon Papers. Barnes and Steve Clark arranged for me to have uninhibited access to these materials, so obviously necessary to the books I was writing. I am grateful for their willingness to grant me access to a central body of documentation vital to the writing of this book.

Mainstays of the *Historical Materialism Book Series*, Sebastian Budgen, Peter Thomas, and Danny Hayward have encouraged my research on Cannon. I appreciate their support, resolute political commitments, and dedication to the publication of Marxist history and theory. I am indebted to Simon Mussell for his copy-editing of a lengthy manuscript.

I am especially thankful to those who originally pushed me to write on Cannon, and who have prodded me to keep going or insisted that I consider texts with which I was unfamiliar or other sources of relevance. Foremost among such advocates has been Paul Le Blanc, who introduced me to the late Frank Lovell and the late Dorothea Breitman, both of whom gave me important primary sources, as did the late Jean Tussey. Paul also provided an extremely thorough reading of the entire manuscript, saving me from a number of infelicities and errors, and offering suggestions for improvement, some of which proved impossible to address.

My oldest friend on the left, Tom Reid, read much of this book in draft form and offered extensive and extremely useful commentary. He poured over various chapters with a fine eye for detail, stylistic improvement, and nuances of interpretation and meaning. I am especially grateful for the work Tom put into this book; it would look quite different without his efforts.

Among others who read drafts of chapters or offered helpful commentary and useful perspective, I thank Michael Goldfield, Michael Taber, David Riehle (whose knowledge of the Minneapolis strikes of 1934 is unrivaled), Donna T. Haverty-Stacke, Ernie Tate, Jess MacKenzie, and Joan Sangster. For research help I am indebted to Tom Mackaman. Others who have contributed to this study in various ways include Alan Campbell, John McIlroy, Marcelo Badaró Mattos, the late Jerry Tulchinsky, Peter Campbell, Charlie Post, Ian McKay, Gregory S. Kealey, Kirk Niergarth, Alan Wald, Jim Barrett, Steven Sandor John, Christopher Phelps, Murray Smith, Sean Purdy, and Ted McCoy.

None of those whom I have thanked in the above paragraphs are responsible for any errors that may remain in this book, which I have done my level best to eliminate. If mistakes remain, they are of course my sole responsibility.

Portions of the manuscript have appeared in different form elsewhere. Much of Chapter 4 appears in my book, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934*, which first appeared in the *Historical Materialism Book Series* with Brill in 2013, and then in a subsequent Haymarket Books edition in 2014. I thank the publishers for permission to reprint material from that book here. My article "The French Turn in the United States: James P. Cannon and the Trotskyist Entry into the Socialist Party, 1934–1937," *Labor History*, 59 (2018), 1–29, draws on the more detailed outline of events in Chapter 5. I thank the editor, Craig Phelan, for permission to reproduce material that first appeared in *Labor History*.

The Canada Research Chairs Program of the Canadian government supported my research for 15 years, during which time I was a Canada Research Chair in the Canadian Studies Department at Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario. I express my appreciation for the funding that allowed me to complete this book and a number of other studies.

I dedicate this book to two people I know differently and, in many ways, lightly: Mike Davis and Ernie Tate. Both have more than a bit of Jim Cannon's kind of revolutionary Irish in them.

I first met Mike Davis in 1981, when I was flogging a little book on E.P. Thompson that I had written for a small independent press in Toronto. In those days, it was commonplace for young and unknown authors like myself to stuff a backpack with books and peddle them directly to large stores like Foyles in London. I also stopped in at the offices of *New Left Review* where Mike was living. He took me out for lunch on the *NLR*, and our pizza and beers turned into more and more drink, culminating in a bleary evening and dinner at the apartment of his exceedingly gracious ex-wife, Brigid Loughran. Her tolerance for Mike seemed boundless, and extended to accommodating his collection of snakes and reptiles. In the 40 years that followed this encounter, Mike has been generous and kind, and our paths have crossed periodically. We shared grief at the death of his very close friend, Michael Sprinker, someone who promoted my writing and with whom I engaged in many late evening phone calls until his life was cut tragically short. I talked to one of Mike's classes when he had a stint teaching at Stony Brook University, and we shared a podium giving keynote addresses at a conference in Montreal, where my partner Joan and I spent a memorable evening with Mike and his wife, Alessandra Moctezuma. Over decades my contact with Mike has been intermittent, always enlivened by his capacity to tell wonderful stories. Many of them were undoubtedly rather tall tales, but all of them kept me (and anyone else within shouting distance) listening. More importantly, Mike has produced a body of writing that has earned him the stature, in my view, of the Left's leading public intellectual in the English-speaking world.

Precisely because Mike has pissed so many people off over the years – some deserving, some not – it is appropriate to express appreciation that many others would be less than inclined to offer. This book is dedicated to him as small thanks for his immense contributions, and his refusals to tame or soften his tone, wild and relentless in its antagonism to injustice and oppression. The voice of Mike Davis has been an impressively and irrepressibly powerful and passionate one that I have long listened to with pleasure and political admiration. So thanks to Mike for being himself.

Ernie Tate I have known *of* for a long time, at least by reputation. As a militant in the Canadian Trotskyist movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and as someone who fought for the politics of revolutionary socialism and built the anti-imperialist movement in Britain in the mid-to-late 1960s, Tate was someone whom I had certainly heard of and read about. But our paths did not really cross until after the publication of my book *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* in 2007. Ernie was, thereafter, a strong advocate of my historical research, as I was of his two-volume memoir, *Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s and 1960s*, which appeared in 2014. I devoured it in a few days and wrote a lengthy and appreciative review. Thereafter, through emails, lunches and dinners in Toronto with Ernie and his partner, Jess MacKenzie, a retirement conference for me at Trent University, and culminating in our mutual involvement in the Trotsky conference in Cuba in 2019, Ernie and I became friends. It saddened me greatly when, after a battle with pancreatic cancer, Ernie died in February 2021, before I could put this book in his hands. Ernie was a rigorous thinker, a Marxist of integrity and principle, and a warm and giving human being. I dedicate this book to him as a way of conveying my regard for Ernie's years of commitment to the revolutionary left and as a grateful expression of how much his support and enthusiasm for my study of Jim Cannon has meant to me. Thanks, too, to Ernie for being himself.

My life with Cannon has always been shared with Joan Sangster. I thank her, as well, for being herself, and, above all, for her love, which I hope she knows is reciprocated, and her indulgences, which have been as many as they have been much appreciated. I could not have finished this book without her deep affection and support and respect for my writing, which has always been offered freely if, occasionally, where Cannon was concerned, with a skeptical reference to his "Saintly" stature.

Figures

- 1 James P. Cannon, 1935. Socialist Workers Party, Pathfinder Press, New York, New York, Steve Clark 144
- 2 Rose Karsner, mid-1920s. Walta Ross, Prometheus Research Library, New York, New York 145
- 3 Maurice Spector, 1932. Archives of the Law Society of Upper Canada, P465, Charles Aylett 145
- 4 Max Shachtman, late 1920s/early 1930s. Max Shachtman Papers, Tamiment Library, New York, New York, NP.087, Box 1, Folder Duplicates 146
- 5 Martin Abern, late 1920s/early 1930s. Max Shachtman Papers, Tamiment Library, New York, NP.087, Box 1, Folder 9 147
- 6 Maurice Spector and Max Shachtman, Spain, 1931–1932. Max Shachtman Papers, Tamiment Library, NP.087, Box 1, Folder 10 148
- 7 Pierre Naville, French Trotskyist, 1930. Max Shachtman Papers, Tamiment Library, NP.087, Box 1, Folder 10 149
- 8 Albert Glotzer, Berlin, 1931. Aufnahme Von Franz Pfemfert Portrait Photographie, Albert Glotzer, in possession of the author 150
- 9 Arne Swabeck, 1934, Communist League of America Headquarters, New York. International News Photos, in possession of the author 151
- 10 Vincent Ray Dunne, 1930s. Jean Tussey, in possession of the author 152
- 11 Communist League of America, National Committee, 1934, left to right: Martin Abern, Vincent Ray Dunne, Carl Skoglund, Maurice Spector, Arne Swabeck, Max Shachtman (absent: James P. Cannon, Albert Glotzer). Max Shachtman Papers, Tamiment Library, NP.087, Box 1, Folder 10 153
- 12 Gerry Allard, editor Progressive Miner, 1930s. Prometheus Research Library 153
- 13 Sylvia Bleeker and Morris Lewit, New York, 1930s. Morris Lewit, Prometheus Research Library 154
- 14 Jean van Heijenoort (Trotsky's personal secretary, 1932–1939) and Max Shachtman, Paris, 1933. Max Shachtman Papers, Tamiment Library, NP.087, Box 1, Folder 10 155
- 15 Diego Rivera Mural, Communist League of America Headquarters, New York, 1933, Lower Row, left to right: Ruth Cannon (daughter of James P. Cannon), Sarah Avrin, Edgar Swabeck (son of Arne Swabeck), Carlo Cowl (son of Sarah Avrin), Arne Swabeck, Max Shachtman, James P. Cannon. Prometheus Research Library 156
- 16 Prelude to the Battle of Deputies Run: Police and a Striker Lay in Street After Club Confrontation, Minneapolis 21 May 1934. Associated Press Photo, in possession of the author 496

- 17 Battle of Deputies Run, Minneapolis, 22 May 1934. Associated Press Photo, in possession of the author 497
- 18 Battle of Deputies Run, Two Women Fighting, 22 May 1934. Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota 498
- 19 Henry Ness Funeral, Minneapolis, 24 July 1934. Minnesota Historical Society 499
- 20 Max Shachtman and James P. Cannon in Police Custody, Minneapolis, 26 July 1934. Minnesota Historical Society 500
- 21 Minneapolis Teamster Leaders: George Frosig, Carl Skoglund, Kelly Postal, Miles Dunne, Vincent Ray Dunne. Acme Newspictures Photo, in possession of the author 501
- 22 Women's Auxiliary Feed Teamster Strikers, 1934. Minnesota Historical Society 502
- 23 Martial Law in Minneapolis: National Guard Escort Striker to Makeshift Military Stockade, 2 August 1934. Acme Newspictures Photo, in possession of the author 503
- 24 Grant Dunne (far left) and Albert Goldman (far right) meet Bill Brown, Miles Dunne, and Vincent Ray Dunne upon their release from the Military Stockade, 2 August 1934. Minnesota Historical Society 504
- 25 By-Laws of General Drivers, Helpers and Inside Workers Union. in possession of the author 505
- 26 Mock Masthead, The Organizer, 1934. Jean Tussey, in possession of the author 506
- 27 Norman Thomas, Socialist Party, 1937. World Wide Photos, in possession of the author 1101
- 28 Norman Thomas (far left) and Travers Clement (middle/mustache), Socialist Party, 1940. Acme Newspictures Photo, in possession of the author 1102
- 29 Socialist Party, 19th Convention, Cleveland, 23 May 1936. Acme Newspictures Photo, in possession of the author 1103
- 30 Moscow Trials Poster, Socialist Party, 1937. Max Shachtman Papers, Tamiment Library, NP.221, Oversize 1104
- 31 Spanish Civil War Protest, Harold Robins in Centre, 1937–1938. Max Shachtman Papers, Tamiment Library, NP.087, Box 1, Folder 10 1105
- 32 Socialist Call, Solidarity with Spain, May Day 1937. Socialist Party, in possession of the author 1106
- 33 Harry Lundeberg, Sailors Union of the Pacific. Acme Newspictures Photo, in possession of the author 1107
- 34 Striking Seamen Vote to Return to Work, San Francisco, 3 February 1937. Acme Newspictures Photo, in possession of the author 1108

- 35 Sailors Union of the Pacific, Maritime Strike Clearance Card, 1937, in possession of the author 1109
- 36 Leon Trotsky and Diego Rivera, Dewey Commission Hearings, Coyoacan, Mexico, April 1937. Albert Glotzer, in possession of the author 1110
- 37 Natalia Sedova Trotsky and Albert Glotzer, Dewey Commission Hearings, Coyoacan, Mexico, April 1937. Albert Glotzer, in possession of the author 1111
- 38 Frida Kahlo, Dewey Commission Hearings, Coyoacan, Mexico, April 1937. Albert Glotzer, in possession of the author 1112
- 39 John McDonald, James T. Farrell, and Albert Glotzer, Dewey Commission Hearings, Coyoacan, Mexico, April 1937. Albert Glotzer, in possession of the author 1113
- 40 Socialist Workers Party, Political Committee Meeting, Clockwise from top left: Felix Morrow, James P. Cannon, Max Shachtman, George Clarke, James Burnham, Nathan Gould, Martin Abern. Socialist Workers Party, Pioneer Publishers, Steve Clark 1114
- 41 Max Shachtman and James P. Cannon, Paris, at the time of the founding of the Fourth International, 1938. Albert Glotzer, Prometheus Research Library 1115
- 42 Max Shachtman and James P. Cannon, Socialist Workers Party Conference, 1939. Max Shachtman Papers, Tamiment Library, NP.087, Box 1, Folder 7 1116

Front page images

- 1 New International, July 1934 680
- 2 The Militant, 15 November 1928 681
- 3 The Militant, 29 January 1934 681
- 4 The Militant, 28 July 1934 682
- 5 New Militant, 12 January 1935 682
- 6 New Militant, 3 August 1935 683
- 7 New Militant, 2 May 1936 683
- 8 New Militant, 6 June 1936 684
- 9 The Organizer, 21 July 1934 684
- 10 The Organizer, 27 July 1934 685
- 11 The Organizer, 22 August 1934 686
- 12 Labor Action, 28 November 1936 687
- 13 Labor Action, 30 January 1937 687
- 14 Labor Action, 6 February 1937 688
- 15 Socialist Appeal, 14 August 1937 688
- 16 Socialist Appeal, 9 October 1937 689
- 17 Socialist Appeal, 27 November 1937 690
- 18 Socialist Appeal, 22 October 1938 690

James P. Cannon and the ‘Prince’s Favors’

James P. Cannon was approaching 40 years of age in 1929. Traditionally, this decisive milestone on adulthood’s journey stimulates reflection and self-assessment. What has been accomplished? What remains to be achieved? Does the future look bright? For most Americans, however, 1929 was not a time that elicited much in the way of optimism. The markets plummeted in October, and economic prospects were bleak. What would come to be known as the Great Depression was just around the calendar corner.

Cannon, as a revolutionary communist,¹ undoubtedly looked at the world differently than did most Americans. He nonetheless shared, at various levels, the worries and uncertainties of the time. His personal circumstances in 1929 were dismal indeed. Reduced to appealing to family members in Kansas for financial aid, Cannon found, not surprisingly, that they could do no better than offer token support, and barely that. This economic malaise was further complicated by a series of unanticipated blows. Lista Makimson, Cannon’s first wife, died in April. This left Cannon’s relationship with his children, Carl and Ruth, and their stepfather, Tilden Collor, unsettled. The anxiety level of a household already staring into the abyss of destitution soared. Rose Karsner, Cannon’s comrade and lover, suffered what the family considered a “break-down.” Jim Cannon, like many Americans, must have spent more than a few sleepless nights worrying about what was in store for himself, loved ones, and friends. Yet he never gave up.

Cannon was one of the “Three Generals With No Army” (the other two were Max Shachtman and Martin Abern) expelled from the Workers (Communist) Party of America late in October 1928. The political sin of this much-maligned trio was its agreement with the platform of the Russian Left Opposition and endorsement of the views of its leading spokesman, Leon Trotsky. After being drummed out of the official, Soviet-backed Communist movement, Cannon was busy, over the course of 1929, trying to piece together a viable organiza-

1 In this study I use lower-case communist to refer to individuals and mobilizations that considered themselves communist, including members of established Communist parties affiliated with Moscow and the Communist International. For such parties/organizations, as well as officials and functionaries associated with these bodies, I use upper-case Communist.

tion of dissident revolutionaries, dedicated to convincing his former comrades of the rightness of his newly-embraced Trotskyism.²

A national conference of those won to Cannon's perspective took place at Chicago in May 1929. There the Communist League of American (Opposition), often referred to as the CLA or the League, was formed, its members convinced they could win the ranks of the now renamed United States Communist Party [CPUSA/CP] to the program of the International Left Opposition [ILO]. Cannon could barely scrape together enough money to get to Chicago and pay for his food. There was no office to work out of, not even a desk; writing and correspondence was done on the kitchen table between meals. Paying the printer to publish pamphlets by Trotsky as well as the CLA's newspaper, *The Militant*, took almost every dollar Cannon and his comrades had at their disposal. But these inauspicious circumstances were never allowed to undermine a vision of what was possible. "We live in hopes," Cannon wrote to one of his precocious youth recruits, Albert Glotzer, in April 1929.³

1 Hope and the Dog Days

Late in November 1929 Cannon penned a tribute to Albert Parsons, one of America's labor martyrs. Executed by the state in the aftermath of Chicago's Haymarket bombing of 4 May 1886, Parsons was a revolutionary who was relentless in his critique of capitalist exploitation and indefatigable in championing the workers' movement. For Cannon, Parsons' legacy lived on through the struggle to defend others victimized by the capitalist state. Along with hundreds of thousands, Cannon stood the "Death Watch" in August 1927 as two Italian-American anarchists, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, were sent

2 I have recently collaborated with Paul Le Blanc, Thomas Bias, and Andrew Pollack in putting together an extensive set of documents relating to the emergence of United States Trotskyism in years that roughly parallel (and extend slightly beyond) those explored in this volume. See Paul Le Blanc, Bryan Palmer, Thomas Bias, and Andrew Pollack, eds., *US Trotskyism, 1928–1965 – Part 1: Emergence – Left Opposition in the United States* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018).

3 On the constraints of this period much could be cited. See, for example, James P. Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism: Report of a Participant* (New York: Pioneer, 1944), 53–97; James P. Cannon to Albert Glotzer, 20 April 1929; Mary (sister) to My Dear Jim, 2 May 1929; Phil (brother) to Dear Jim, 8 May 1929, all in James P. Cannon Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, Box 3, Folder 2 [hereafter JPC Papers]. Bertram D. Wolfe's characterization is in "The Three Generals With No Army," *Daily Worker*, 27 November 1928. Glotzer's brief account of the period is in Albert Glotzer, *Trotsky: Memoir & Critique* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989), 22–24.

to the electric chair by the Massachusetts government and its justice system. Cannon remembered Parsons, condemning the state-sanctioned terror that sent the Texas-born anarcho-communist to the gallows:

They say he was defeated, he went down
To everlasting failure and disgrace
On that gray morning when they woke the town
To see him hanging in the market place;
Long has he mouldered in the graveyard gloom,
Never to rebel nor ever rise again;
The dust of forty years is on his tomb
And dust are all his dreams, they say, and vain.⁴

It is difficult not to read into these words a sense of Cannon's doubts about his own prospects.

A native-born American revolutionary educated in the radicalism of his Irish-American father, Cannon joined the Socialist Party of Eugene Debs in his youth. He cut his rebel's teeth in defense of class-war prisoners before taking up with the hobo agitational army of the Industrial Workers of the World [IWW]. Jailed for fomenting strikes in the repressive atmosphere of 1913–19, Cannon was among the key figures in the communist underground of the Red Scare years. By the mid-1920s, he was an influential leader in the American section of the Communist International [Comintern/CI]. Cannon could have lived out his life as a Communist functionary, and done so in relative comfort (by his modest standards and customary disdain of material acquisitions), complacent in the belief that he stood for the cause of proletarian revolution.⁵

Jim Cannon was nonetheless troubled. He grasped intuitively in the mid-1920s that something was wrong in the Workers (Communist) Party. Slowly, in concert with Rose and others close to him, he began to realize that problems he had originally regarded as peculiar to the United States were related to what was happening in the Soviet Union and the Comintern. At the Sixth World Congress of that body, held in Moscow during the summer of 1928, Cannon came across a document authored by Trotsky that posed a sharp critique of the abandonment of revolutionary internationalism in favor of a commitment to create "socialism in one country." Cannon saw the merits of Trotsky's

4 J.P. Cannon, "Parsons (Version B)," unpublished typescript, courtesy Jeanne Morgan and Alan Wald.

5 For a full accounting see Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

insistence that this was a wrong turn for the revolutionary movement. He had learned much about internationalism from Lenin and the 1917 Revolution, and Cannon, struggling to keep these lessons alive, suddenly confronted the necessity of challenging the policies of the Soviet leadership. In taking this bold and brave step into the unknown, he recognized his duty as a revolutionist:

The foot-loose Wobbly rebel that I used to be had imperceptibly begun to fit comfortably into a swivel chair, protecting himself in his seat by small maneuvers and evasions, and even permitting himself a certain conceit about his adroit accommodation to this shabby game. I saw myself for the first time as another person, as a revolutionist who was on the road to becoming a *bureaucrat*. The image was hideous, and I turned away from it in disgust.⁶

A working-class autodidact who developed, in his youth, a taste for literature, Cannon recalled Shakespeare's observation in *Henry VIII*:

O! How wretched is that poor man that hangs on prince's favors!
There is, betwixt that smile we would aspire to, that sweet aspect
of princes and their ruin, more pangs and fears than wars or women
have – and when he falls, he falls like Lucifer, never to hope again.⁷

Once he joined the International Left Opposition, casting his lot with the reviled Trotskyists, Cannon could hope, but he would do so without "prince's favors." The costs would be considerable. Cannon's and Karsner's back pay as revolutionists working full time for the International Labor Defense was withheld, leaving the duo destitute.⁸ Their modest apartment was burglarized by former comrades, who took documents and ransacked the couple's modest belongings. A campaign of misrepresentation, lies, and slander was mounted against the CLA. Many comrades and close friends, with whom Cannon had lived and shared much for over a decade, now reviled him. As Cannon

6 James P. Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism: Report of a Participant* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1962), 225. See also Harry Ring interview with James P. Cannon, 13 June 1973, 12–13 in possession of the author [hereafter Ring interview].

7 Cannon recalled these Shakespearean lines when rethinking the early history of Communism in 1955, applying them to William Z. Foster, saying that "Foster should have listened to Shakespeare." See Jeanne Morgan, "Journal from James P. Cannon's Office, 1954–1956 [Notes kept by secretary for personal memento, without Cannon's knowledge]," Unpublished manuscript, entry 6 April 1955, 9, courtesy of Jeanne Morgan and Alan Wald.

8 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 55.

and others tried to put forward their ideas, whether by selling *The Militant* or presenting a public forum at a labor hall, they routinely met with the violence of orchestrated gangsterism. Workers Defense Guards were mobilized to protect Cannon and other CLA members and leaders from physical attack by Stalinist thugs, who attended meetings only to shout down speakers, bringing with them blackjacks and furriers' knives should the attack escalate to pitched battle, which it often did.⁹

All of this was on the domestic front. Internationally the situation was, if anything, worse. Banished from the Soviet Union, Trotsky was driven from pillar to post throughout Europe.¹⁰ Others faced banishment to work camps, incarceration, campaigns of denunciation, and torture.¹¹ The International Left Opposi-

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- 9 As an introduction only to the campaign of theft, violence, and intimidation unleashed against Cannon and the American Left Oppositionists see James P. Cannon, *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism: Selected Writings and Speeches, 1920–1928* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 1992), 561–571; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 66–73; “The Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” Number 488, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, New York, 1963, 175–194; Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialist's Odyssey Through the 'American Century'* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), 39, 54; and various issues of *The Militant*, 15 November 1928 through 15 April 1929. The documents stolen from Cannon in two separate burglaries on 23 December 1928 and 14 January 1929, are introduced by two Jay Lovestone letters: Jay Lovestone to Dear Comrades, 27 December 1928; 6 January 1929, Reel 2D, Documents from Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Contemporary History, Microfilm Copies Held, Prometheus Research Library, New York [hereafter Russian Center, PRL], which also contains the correspondence, documents, and mailing lists pilfered. See, as well, “A Burglary – Its Political Meaning,” *The Militant*, 1 January 1929; Mike Taber, “Papers Stolen 70 Years Ago Tell History of Communist Movement in United States,” *The Militant*, 26 May 1997. Recent biographers of the major leaders of American Communism – Jay Lovestone, William Z. Foster, and Earl Browder – during the period when violence was unleashed against their Trotskyist opponents say little, if anything, about this gangsterism. See Ted Morgan, *A Covert Life: Jay Lovestone – Communist, Anti-Communist, and Spymaster* (New York: Random House, 1999); Edward P. Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994); James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999); James R. Ryan, *Earl Browder: The Failure of American Communism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997).
- 10 For a brief statement see Leon Trotsky, *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 558–583; and for a more detailed account, Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929–1940* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).
- 11 A measure of this can be gleaned from Susan Weissman, *Victor Serge: The Course is Set on Hope* (New York and London: Verso, 2001), 109–171, while Leon Trotsky, *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence*, edited and translated by Alan Woods (London: Well Red Books, 2016), contains an extensive accounting of the repressive measures brought to bear on Stalin's political opponents inside the Soviet Union.

tion struggled to hammer out a comprehensive program. In 1929 it was still far short of completing this essential task. German dissident communist and Leninbund founder Hugo Urbahns initially embraced Trotsky and his allies, but soon broke from the ILO. Fractiousness also erupted among the Left Opposition ranks in Belgium and Spain.¹²

The Stalinized Communist International, meanwhile, created confusion for dissidents when it veered off the Leninist united front course of the early-to-mid 1920s, embracing the adventurist ultra-militancy and sectarian policies associated with the Third Period. Adopted at the 1928 Congress, the representation of revolutionary developments encompassed in the notion of the Third Period was premised on the conviction that great changes were in the offing. A First Period of revolutionary struggle (1917–22) unleashed in the era of World War I and culminating in the victorious Bolshevik Revolution, was followed by a Second Period of capitalist stabilization lasting from 1922–28. With the onslaught of the Third Period, the Comintern projected widespread capitalist crises, in which economic collapse would create new conditions of revolutionary possibility that could only be seized and advanced by the proletarian Communist Party vanguard. Within political economies like the United States, Communists were thus advised by the Comintern to shun all reformist and social democratic opponents, be they trade union leaders or radicals associated with another political party or organized tendency. Such pretenders to working-class leadership were little more than agents of reaction in the workers' movement, castigated with the derogatory label, "social fascist." The result was that communists who had throughout the 1920s struggled to build principled united fronts with such dissidents, organizing alongside them and campaigning together at the same time as they highlighted how their revolutionary program differed from the policies and practices of these counterparts on the left, now shunned such common ventures. United States communists embarked on building "Red" unions separate and distinct from the mainstream American Federation of Labor, pursuing defense mobilizations in which potential allies were rebuked rather than rallied, and in general promoting a militant politics, summed up in the slogan "class against class." After the doldrums of the 1920s, and with the Great Depression unraveling in the early 1930s, many workers were drawn to the Communist Party's militant espousal of the necessity of class struggle politics. The rhetoric of "class against class" was understandably appealing. Militants were attracted to the willingness of the Communist

12 For an introduction to the International Left Opposition and its early history of political differentiation see Pierre Broué, *Trotsky* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), 640–654.

Party to fight on many fronts, which included impressive unemployed agitations; working-class resistance in shops, mines and factories; and anti-racist campaigns such as those mounted in defense of the Scottsboro Boys. Radicalizing workers regarded criticism of the isolating and sectarian nature of the CP's Third Period activity as unconvincing.¹³ North American Trotskyists found it difficult to swim against this current of seeming endorsement of class struggle, even as it often isolated the minority of conscious militants from established unions and marginalized them in struggles to build and sustain mass movements of opposition to intensifying capitalist exploitation, preparations for war, the threatening menace of fascism, and racist repression.

The Communist International thus spoke the language of Third Period ultra-leftism, condemning supposedly counter-revolutionary opponents with bravado, at the same time that it abandoned the politics of revolutionary internationalism, embracing instead a bureaucratic conservatism, espoused in the Stalinist programmatic turn to "socialism in one country." This new orientation subordinated the interests of the world's workers to the preservation of the Soviet state apparatus, increasingly under the autocratic control of Stalin. At the same time, Stalin lifted a page from the Left Opposition in promoting Soviet industrialization. In what constituted a Third Period domestic "class against class" Soviet development, a war was waged against the "kulaks," a rel-

13 For a conventional account of Third Period Communist activity in the United States see Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), esp. 3–166. Regional/local studies often differ in their approaches and orientations, but rarely take up a critique of Third Period Stalinism and its adventurist militancy and ultra-left sectarianism similar to that which animates this study. See, for instance, Paul Lyons, *Philadelphia Communists. 1936–1956* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1982); Vernon L. Pedersen, *The Communist Party in Maryland, 1919–1957* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Randi Storch, *Red Chicago: American Communism at its Grassroots, 1928–1935* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007). The scholarship on United States Communism that addresses important issues such as race and gender rarely comes to grips with what was problematic in the activities of the Communist Party in the Third Period. Among the studies that could be cited, many of them excellent in their particulars, are: Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), esp. 103–159; Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning For Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Margaret Stevens, *Red International and Black Caribbean: Communists in New York City, Mexico and the West Indies, 1919–1939* (London: Pluto Press, 2017). An exceptional recent study that does address the formative years of Stalinism in ways that I find helpful is Jacob A. Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919–1929* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014).

actively affluent layer of the peasantry. With capitalism plunging into the Great Depression, the Soviet Union's bold advances under the first Five Year Plan persuaded many militants dissatisfied with the Kremlin's previous collaborationist policies that "Trotskyists" were merely chronic malcontents, more concerned with scoring doctrinal points than changing social reality.¹⁴

In 1944, Cannon looked back on late 1929 as "the real dog days of the Left Opposition":

The Communist Party ... appeared to be the most radical and revolutionary force in the country. The party began to grow and swell its ranks and to attract sympathizers in droves. We, with our criticisms and theoretical explanations, appeared in the eyes of all as a group of impossibilists, hairsplitters, naggers. We were going around trying to make people understand that the theory of socialism in one country is fatal for a revolutionary movement in the end; that we must clear up this question of theory at all costs. ... we were shut off from all contact. We had no friends, no sympathizers, no periphery around our movement. We had no chance whatever to participate in the mass movement. Whenever we tried to get into a worker's organization we would be expelled as counter-revolutionary Trotskyists. We tried to send delegations to unemployed meetings. Our credentials would be rejected on the ground that we were enemies of the working class. We were utterly isolated, forced in upon ourselves.¹⁵

This is the kind of context in which Cannon wrote the first despairing stanza of his poem "Parsons." Yet even when seemingly overcome by death and defeat, the righteousness of Parsons' struggle against exploitation and oppression ultimately prevails:

14 Ring interview, 10 May 1974, 19; and for a contemporary Left Opposition critique of the Comintern's Third Period sectarianism/militancy and the importance of the struggle against the Kulak see "For the Russian Opposition! Against Opportunism and Bureaucracy in the Workers Communist Party of America! A Statement to American Communists by James P. Cannon, Martin Abern, and Max Shachtman," Clause 10 b), *The Militant*, 15 November 1928. For a discussion of how all of this unfolded within the Soviet Union see Trotsky, *Stalin*.

15 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 90–92. Confirmation of Cannon's representation of early Trotskyists as pariahs on the left appears in Paul Jacobs, *Is Curly Jewish? A Political Self-Portrait Illuminating Three Turbulent Decades of Social Revolt, 1935–1965* (New York: Atheneum, 1965), 30–32.

And yet his footsteps on the gallows' stair
 Resound like drumbeats, quickening the feet
 Of men who hear and even now prepare
 The march of stern avengers in the street;
 And blazoned on their banners overhead
 Is the accusing silence of the dead.¹⁶

In 1929, as Cannon knew all too well, "the accusing silence of the dead" was far more complicated for revolutionaries than ever before. To fight against capitalism, on the one hand, and Stalinism, on the other, was an uphill struggle that did not become any easier in the years to come.¹⁷

It was nonetheless to be Cannon's life work. In building the Communist League of America (Opposition) into the Socialist Workers Party [SWP], Cannon's decade-long labors from 1928–38 encompassed bitter faction fights, fusions, splits, and entries, as well as mass work in strikes reaching from New York's hotels to the Minneapolis trucking industry and into the maritime unions of the Pacific Coast. These years began as Trotskyism's American dog days, but they progressed to be its finest hour. Cannon made mistakes, to be sure, but he resolutely stood the difficult, defiant ground of the anti-capitalist, anti-Stalinist revolutionary. In every political move, from public campaigns to conversations with possible recruits, Cannon drew on the lessons of the Russian Revolution and the programmatic issues involved in the struggle between Stalin and Trotsky. For Cannon, this all strengthened his belief in the revolutionary potential of the American working class. One comrade remembered Cannon as "a man who had the determination and the iron will to fight against all odds for his convictions."¹⁸ He needed no "prince's favors," and he received

16 Cannon, "Parsons."

17 Trotsky summed up the nature of the challenge in a 1939 article on "The USSR in War." He was aware that in the struggle against capitalism and its regime of accumulation based on private property, exploitation of the working class, and ideological elevation of "the market" above the collective needs of humanity, it was necessary to defend what remained of socialist achievement in the Soviet Union. This included state/collectivized property and the planned economy. Yet, in doing so it was equally necessary to struggle against and expose the "parasitic bureaucracy" that dominated the socialized economy of the Soviet Union and that determined policies within the Communist International so as to protect the privileged Stalinist caste and thus, inevitably, thwart the possibility of international proletarian revolution. Few political struggles would be more difficult to mount than this principled opposition to *both* capitalism and Stalinism. See Leon Trotsky, "The USSR in War," in *In Defense of Marxism* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 3–21.

18 Bill Kitt in Les Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him: By Thirty-Three Comrades, Friends, and Relatives* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 84.

none. Cannon regarded himself as a soldier of the revolution, often called upon “to crawl on [his] belly through the mud for the sake of the Fourth International,” founded by Trotsky in 1938 to preserve the heritage of the Bolshevik Revolution and defend it against both the attacks of capitalism and the corruptions of Stalinism.¹⁹

2 Historiography's House of Mirrors

Historiography has not been particularly generous to James P. Cannon and the ideas of the Left Opposition.²⁰ Writing on Communism in the United States is polarized into two camps.²¹ A language of “traditionalists” vs. “revisionists” frames discussion of writing on the CPUSA.²² Traditionalists, associated with the original arguments of Theodore Draper and the later publications of Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, see Communism in America as a foreign import, in which the course of development was always dictated by Moscow. The preferred subject of choice in the traditionalist liberal anti-communist arsenal has become espionage, as if the very existence of Soviet spies constituted a definitive rebuttal of any attempt to present the history of the revolutionary left positively.²³ Revisionists, most of whom trace their interpretive lineage to

19 James P. Cannon, *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* (New York: Pioneer Press, 1943), 139.

20 For my earlier arguments on the historiography of American Communism, which I will not repeat in their entirety here, see Bryan D. Palmer, “Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism,” *American Communist History*, 2 (December 2003), 139–174; Palmer, *Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 8–20; Palmer, “What Was Great About Theodore Draper and What Was Not,” *American Communist History*, 8 (June 2009), 15–22; Palmer, “How Can We Write Better Histories of Communism?” *Labour/Le Travail*, 83 (Spring 2019), 199–232.

21 For an overview of the “generational” divergences of scholarship see Maurice Isserman, “Three Generations: Historians View American Communism,” *Labor History*, 26 (Fall 1985), 517–545.

22 Such terms are premised on a certain labeling that fixes the beginning point of Communist historiography as the two-volume Fund for the Republic-sponsored studies of Theodore Draper. Those who continue to adhere to Draper's views are thus traditionalists, while those opposed to his perspective are revisionists. See Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking, 1957); Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: Viking, 1960). As I have suggested elsewhere, it is possible to appreciate Draper's immense contribution and refuse the politics of his liberal Cold War anti-communism. See Palmer, “What Was Great About Theodore Draper and What Was Not.”

23 See, for instance, John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *In Denial: Historians, Communism & Espionage* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003).

a post-1960s New Left scholarship, tend to focus on local circumstances, and depict the history of American Communism as an essentially indigenous, and valid, struggle for social justice. They thus downplay the importance of shifts in political orientation emanating from Moscow in assessing communists' roles in the street struggles and political protests that often gave expression to the aspirations and agitations of African Americans, the unemployed, ethnic radicals, nascent feminists, progressive intellectuals, and militant trade unionists. Left activism, not spies, is the revisionists' preferred research topic. And in the mix of mobilization, revisionists generally find that the Party line, as laid down from above (be it Moscow or New York), was often implemented differently or applied with a certain looseness that calls into question the traditionalist fixation on mechanical, top-down dictation of policy.

The traditionalist and revisionist camps thus generally talk past one another, irreconcilable in their difference.²⁴ Even among those who would acknowledge, as has James R. Barrett in a rethinking of the 1930s-generated Communist International turn to the Popular Front, that both revisionists and traditionalists have made contributions to an informed perspective on communism, the divide separating the identifiable analytic camps is obvious.²⁵ There are nevertheless odd sets of shared assumptions and interpretive outcomes that emerge out of what is increasingly a historiographic house of mirrors. Both the old guard Draperite anti-communists and the New Left-inflected historians who sympathize with the Communist Party accept Stalinism as the authentic continuity of Leninism too easily and uncritically. Randi Storch, for instance, refers to "the Marxist-Leninist hierarchical style of organization" and congeals the "international communist movement," the rule of Stalin, and "Leninist principles." This revisionist characterization fits comfortably with traditionalist claims of Klehr and Haynes that, "The Soviet regime was a tyranny from

24 See John Earl Haynes, "The Cold War Debate Continues: A Traditionalist View of Historical Writing on Domestic Communism and Anti-Communism," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 2 (Winter 2000), 76–115; Haynes and Klehr, "The Historiography of American Communism: An Unsettled Field," *Labour History Review*, 68 (April 2003), 61–78; Storch, *Red Chicago*, 2–6. Michael E. Brown has offered two statements on Communist historiography that, while they do not fixate on the traditionalist/revisionist labels, largely reproduce this dichotomization, insisting that the New Left-influenced histories of the post-1970 years have struggled to understand American Communism within the limitations of United States society and history. See Michael E. Brown, "Introduction: The History of the History of U.S. Communism," in Michael E. Brown et al., eds., *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of US Communism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993), 15–44; Michael E. Brown, *The Historiography of Communism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).

25 James R. Barrett, "Rethinking the Popular Front," *Rethinking Marxism*, 21 (October 2009), 531–550.

its origins” and that, “The Communist movement founded by the Bolshevik revolution was tyrannical both in theory and practice.”²⁶

Even as revisionists and traditionalists disagree, they also converge at important analytic points. Klehr and Haynes look only to Moscow to explain American Communist history: “American communists always strove to do what Moscow wanted, nothing more, nothing less.”²⁷ In their documentary collection, *The Soviet World of American Communism*, Klehr, Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson proclaim that, “there was never a time when the leaders could blind themselves to the fact that their acceptance of the Soviet line had to be complete and unswerving. And even the rank-and-file could not miss the key aspects of Soviet domination.”²⁸ Storch objects that the detailed complexities of history can only be comprehensively understood through a “community study,” where the communist rank-and-file can be “framed in a local context.”²⁹ Yet these mirror images, seemingly oppositional, reflect a similar one-

26 Storch, *Red Chicago*, 4, 8, 215; Storch, “American Communism and Soviet Russia: A View From the Streets,” *American Communist History*, 8 (June 2009), 28; Storch, “‘Their unCommunist Stand’: Chicago’s Foreign-Language Speaking Communists and the Question of Stalinization, 1928–1935,” in Norman LaPorte, Kevin Morgan, and Matthew Worley, eds., *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern: Perspectives on Stalinization, 1917–1953* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 278; Haynes and Klehr, *In Denial*, 14; John Earl Haynes, “Poison or Cancer: Stalinism and American Communism,” *American Communist History*, 2 (December 2003), 187. The notion that Leninism led inevitably and seamlessly to Stalinism has become a staple of much of the Soviet Revolution historiography, both in the West and in the East. This claim is argued against by a number of the most sophisticated commentators on the 1917 Revolution and its subsequent Stalinist degeneration. See, for instance, Vadim Z. Rogovin, *1937: Stalin’s Year of Terror* (Oak Park, MI: Mehrling Books, 1998); and two recent studies, neither of which exonerate Lenin from criticism, but both of which refuse the simplistic ideological claim that Leninism led inexorably to Stalinism: China Miéville, *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2017); Paul Le Blanc, *October Song: Bolshevik Triumph, Communist Tragedy, 1917–1924* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2017). For a rigorous historiographic accounting of the collapsing of Stalinism into Leninism that rejects this kind of interpretation see John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, “Bolshevism, Stalinism, and the Comintern: a historical controversy revisited,” *Labor History*, 60 (January 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656x.2019.1572872>, accessed 23 February 2019. I disagree with McIlroy and Campbell on nuanced points of periodization and analysis, but find their canvassing of the historiography impressive, raising the bar of analytic standards with respect to the historiography of Communist Parties in the United States and the United Kingdom.

27 Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York: Twayne, 1992), 179.

28 Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 12.

29 Storch, *Red Chicago*, 5, 230.

dimensionality. A top-down, institutional history of American Communism requires a study of precisely how practical activities were carried out by specific people in particular situations. Conversely, a social history of the revolutionary left from the so-called bottom up surely demands an acute understanding of the local, national, and international contexts in which it unfolded. Issues of leadership were of crucial importance in the world's Communist movement, and rank-and-file members of the United States Party undoubtedly took their cues from and looked for guidance to the Communist International.

Traditionalists and revisionists thus unnecessarily restrict their interpretive vision. It is as though they are set to commence an analytic marathon with their starting gates set up at opposite ends of the racecourse. Eventually, however, they end up running into one another. For instance, both revisionists and traditionalists depoliticize their subjects of study. One side treats rank-and-file communists as little more than irrelevant pawns, while the other sidesteps the importance of principles and programmatic issues. Communist Party membership and the political choices and loyalties it undeniably involved are downplayed; the meaning of specific policies for rank-and-file members and their involvement in the just causes associated with affiliation to the Communist International seem reduced to a lowest common denominator. As Geoff Eley has pointed out, "The pull towards social history can sometimes diminish the significance of formal communist affiliations, leading in extreme cases (mainly in the literature of the CPUSA) to a history of communism with the Communism left out."³⁰

The struggles and commitments of communists, in revisionist accounts, are often interpreted as distinct from or different than what distant officials mandated and expected.³¹ To be sure, this dissonance could happen. But it matters very much how, why, and over what such differentiations developed. Some disagreement warranted disciplinary actions taken on behalf of the Party, while other acts of transgression, even defiance, might elicit a wink and a nod. There were times, of course, when those who failed to march to the drummer of

30 Geoff Eley, "International Communism in the Heyday of Stalin," *New Left Review*, 157 (January – February, 1986), 92.

31 This animates the recent writing of Storch and Barrett, cited above, but in virtually all revisionist writing it is possible to challenge the interpretation of how much and in what ways Party members stepped outside of top-down directives or moved and influenced the Party to act in new ways. One study often cited in this regard, for instance, is easily read as indicative of how constraining official policies were for rank-and-file members and secondary cadre in local leadership roles. See Robert W. Cherny, "Prelude to the Popular Front: The Communist Party in California, 1931–1935," *American Communist History*, 1 (June 2002), 5–42.

Comintern dictate would feel the full wrath of Party ostracism. It is undeniably true that Stalinism and Stalinism alone can never explain all of the stories that comprise the multitude of experiences encompassing the totality of Communism's history in any given circumstance, be it regional, national, or international. Stalinization is, in Norman LaPorte's, Kevin Morgan's, and Matthew Worley's words, obviously "not the whole truth, even if it is nothing but the truth."³²

The point, however, is how we assess the *significance* of specific truths when balanced against each other. How important was the weight of Stalinism's programmatic twists and turns, all of which were largely and publicly accepted by Communist Party members as perhaps *the* fundamental political truth of being a member of this revolutionary body, compared to other areas of Party life? Can we really compare as equivalents a particular Party member's public deviation from certain Comintern priorities, such as the organization of Red unions in the Third Period, to an ethnic federation or local branch failing to live up to a pristine articulation of what was expected of Communists? Fraternization with "socialist fascists" in a 1932 unemployed mobilization might be given a pass by Party leaders in certain circumstances. Yet appearing on a political podium and refusing to label all trade union leaders and militant activists who did not fully agree with the Communist Party as enemies of the working class would likely earn the dissenting CPer censure or worse. Every socio-political organization of any size will harbor deviants, dissidents, and the somewhat disconnected. But at the level of meaning, even those distanced at certain times from a totalizing commitment to follow the rules of the Party might well consider themselves loyalists and adherents of the cause. Their truths were multiple, of course, but also, quite often in the end, singular: as Communists they were against capitalism, they were society's outsiders, they were advocates of the Soviet Union, even defenders of Joseph Stalin. They might well defy this or that particular programmatic expectation while conforming, basically, to the embrace of world revolution and the principles of united front endeavors in the early-to-mid 1920s; understandings of "socialism in one country" and Third Period sectarianism in the late 1920s and early 1930s; adaptations to the post-1935 class collaboration of the Popular Front. Supposedly freewheeling, locally embedded communists shifted with these programmatic oscillations and rose in meeting after meeting to sing the Comintern anthem: "'Tis the final conflict,/Let each stand in his place,/The International Soviet/Shall be the human

32 Norman LaPorte, Kevin Morgan, and Matthew Worley, "Introduction," in LaPorte, Morgan, and Worley, eds., *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern: Perspectives on Stalinization, 1917–1953* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 17.

race.”³³ If Draper’s advocates tend to hear only the sound of one hand of foreign domination clapping, their opponents seem able to discern only the thud of the police baton on the backs of jobless street protesters or the good work done in the creation of industrial unionism. Historiography’s house of mirrors not only distorts; it is well sound-proofed. At issue, often, is the meaning of Stalinism, which neither traditionalists nor revisionists address adequately.³⁴

33 On the collective identity of Communists and how this was sealed in a relationship to the Soviet Union see Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

34 I have addressed Stalinism’s meaning in my earlier study: Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 4–7. This brief assessment of Stalinism places a priority on the shift in the Communist International’s policy from World Revolution to “Socialism in One Country,” stressing that this constituted a fundamental programmatic break differentiating Leninism and Stalinism. Occurring in the context of acute material constraints and Stalin’s tightening grip on the Communist Party’s apparatus, it was nevertheless the case that both of these negative influences could have been countered had not the revolutionary program guiding the Soviet workers’ state been reversed. The decisive articulation of “Socialism in One Country” as the policy of the Comintern licensed the arbitrary authority of Moscow and the implementation of all kinds of repressive measures, anti-Marxist conceptualizations, and mercurial policy shifts, from Third Period adventurism to Popular Front class collaborations. Thus the bureaucratization and use of purges and terror that accelerated from 1925–38 must be understood as much as consequences as they are causes of Stalinism, which was fundamentally a defeat of the revolutionary program of the Communist International. This kind of approach differs, then, from the stress placed on Stalinization’s origins in creating the “rule of the apparatus” and the particularities of national sections that is evident in Hermann Weber’s influential discussion of the German Communist Party, first elaborated in studies of the 1960s, and which are updated and summarized in Hermann Weber, “The Stalinization of the KPD: Old and New Views,” in LaPorte, Morgan, and Worley, eds., *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern*, 22–44. Weber’s more recent writing also sees Bolshevization in the 1921–22 years as “the prehistory of the KPD’s Stalinization” (23). This provides an important bridge connecting traditionalist and revisionist understandings of Stalinism’s origins in Leninism. Crucial texts in Trotsky’s critique of Stalinism, the first written in 1923, the second in 1937, are Leon Trotsky, *The New Course* (1923), in Max Shachtman, introduced, *The New Course by Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for the New Course* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965); Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where is it Going?* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972). These texts were followed by the posthumously-published Trotsky, *Stalin*, a bastardized edition of which appeared in 1946, translated and recast by Charles Malamuth. This edited and redacted version has been replaced by the usefully retranslated, re-edited, and reissued 2016 Alan Woods edition. See also, Perry Anderson, “Trotsky’s Interpretation of Stalinism,” *New Left Review*, 139 (May – June 1983), 49–58; Ernest Mandel, *Trotsky: A Study in the Dynamic of His Thought* (London: New Left Books, 1979), 75–87; Mandel, *Trotsky as Alternative* (London: Verso, 1995); Murray Smith, “Revisiting Trotsky: Reflections on the Stalinist Debacle and Trotskyism as Alternative,” *Rethinking Marxism*, 9 (Fall 1996/1997), 40–67. It is somewhat surprising, given Trotsky’s writings on

3 Mirror Image Refusals

For traditionalists Stalinism is an indiscriminate term designating the continuity of Bolshevik autocracy. They have a field day in detailing the brutality, authoritarianism, and lies that characterize the Soviet regime of the 1930s and 1940s. They refuse to acknowledge, however, that this was a dramatic departure from the governing principles and practices of the early years of Bolshevik rule under Lenin and Trotsky. Diamonds, jewelry, and a variety of valuables transferred to John Reed and others in 1920 to support the revolutionary movement in the United States are, for instance, regarded no differently than Soviet funding that was, in the Stalin era, used to infiltrate and burglarize rival left organizations, even bankroll the assassination of Trotsky in 1940. Traditionalists present all of this as a seamless web of “Moscow gold,” a flow of funds that insured obeisance to the totalitarian Communist International. To read the two volumes of documents amassed by Klehr, Haynes, and others to confirm the view that Communism, whether in the Soviet Union or the United States, was born autocratic, is to come to an obvious conclusion. Documentation confirming Soviet authoritarian rule and tyranny is thin and ambiguous in its meaning with respect to the early revolutionary record, roughly lasting from 1917–24. The record of incriminating evidence on this score, however, accumulates as Stalinism consolidated in the mid-to-late 1920s and achieved undisputed dominance in the 1930s.³⁵

Nouveau arriviste traditionalist, Eric Arnesen, argues that Leninism and Stalinism can be fused, doing so by ideological assertion and dubious scholarly practices. Insisting that the original Bolshevik project under Lenin’s leadership was little more than the exercise of revolutionary terror exemplified by “its record of killing,” Arnesen considers the “established scholarly understanding” of this tyrannical order to be definitive. Yet his citations and his argumentation are revealing. Arnesen begins with a quote from a textbook on Russian history describing “High Stalinism” in the 1930s as “one of the most criminal regimes that ever existed on the face of the earth.” He then draws on this textbook’s

Stalinism and “the revolution betrayed,” to find historians of international communism suggesting that Stalinization as an “analytical concept” “emerged only in the years around 1968, with the decline of communist parties and the rise in critiques from the New Left.” See Brigitte Studer, “Stalinization: Balance Sheet of a Complex Notion,” in LaPointe, Morgan, and Worley, eds., *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern*, 45.

- 35 Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Fridorikh Irorevich Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); Klehr, Haynes, and Anderson, *Soviet World of American Communism*; John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, “‘Moscow Gold’: Confirmed at Last,” *Labor History*, 33 (No. 2, 1992), 279–293.

assertion, which is made on the basis of no substantive evidence, that Stalinism was merely following in Leninism's footsteps, extrapolating from this claim that "terror had been part of the Leninist system from its inception." That established to his satisfaction, Arnesen quotes a 1922 letter from Lenin to Molotov, in which there is reference to shooting recalcitrant bourgeoisie and reactionary clergy. Case closed.

Arnesen's source for the Lenin-Molotov letter is a book on genocide that includes a chapter on "Soviet Terror and Agriculture" which notes that Stalin's "mass killings of 1930–1938 composed 90 percent of the USSR's total of 799,455 documented extrajudicial executions between 1921 and 1953." To be sure, the author of this global history of extermination indicts Lenin as well as Stalin, but as is clear from the dates and figures presented comparing these two Soviet leaders this is a proverbial case of likening apples and oranges. While the case for Stalinist atrocity is unimpeachable, the argument against Lenin is largely ideological and lacks anything approximating the kinds of convincing evidence easily assembled with respect to the escalating and arbitrary history of Soviet terror that, by the 1930s, altered the nature of the once-revolutionary workers' republic.

As for the infamous Lenin-Molotov communication, Arnesen's citation of this document is partial and, in failing to convey the history of its contested meaning, obscures far more than it reveals. R.W. Davies, a respected academic authority on Soviet history, well versed in the politics and economics of the 1920s and 1930s eras that are central to understanding Leninism and Stalinism, brought the Lenin-Molotov document to the attention of western historians in his 1997 book *Soviet History in the Yeltsin Era*. What was most noteworthy about Davies' treatment of this "highly secret" letter and its emergence from the Soviet archives in 1988, was that its discovery corresponded with a historiographic assault on Leninism as the Soviet Union was imploding. Davies outlines a many-sided debate in which a divided academic historical community in Russia lined up into pro and anti-Lenin camps. For the latter, this single Lenin letter was a telling document, but many other historians saw it as an isolated strand in the weave of a larger, historical cloth. They mounted a "rigorous defence of Leninism and of Lenin's policies in revolution and civil war" Mass killing, these historians insisted, was not characteristic of the early Bolshevik regime; repression in the Lenin era was a defensive reaction to particular circumstances associated with a traumatic and threatening period of Civil War. The articles written by these defenders of Lenin, according to Davies, were "on the whole thoughtful and not unconstructive." Alongside this work, there were also significant "efforts to rehabilitate Trotsky ... led by professional historians." Liberal intellectuals, riding the tide of anti-communism, reacted to these

scholarly reconsiderations, attacking Trotsky as “being as bad as or even worse than Stalin.” Davies, who certainly does not tar Lenin or Trotsky with the brush of mass killing, hardly confirms Arnesen’s confident assertions about scholarly consensus. If there is academic agreement on how to interpret Lenin and Stalin, their relationship, and the question of violence within distinct periods of Soviet Communism’s historical development, Davies should certainly be referenced. Yet the nuanced conclusion reached by Davies, especially with respect to the meaning attributed to a solitary Lenin letter, is that, in the context of 1988–90, “Historical scholarship proved quite unable to stand outside the general political ferment.”³⁶

Communist historiography, situated within a late twentieth-century implosion of the Soviet Union, largely confirms Davies’ insightful if axiomatic comment. As political cultures, East and West, moved decidedly to the right in the 1980s and 1990s, historiographic trajectories also gravitated ideologically, trending in conservative directions. Arnesen’s anti-Lenin commentary was part of a broader analytic repudiation, which included an academic assault on Trotsky.

36 Quotes in the above paragraphs from Eric Arnesen, “Faction Figure: James P. Cannon, Early Communist History, and Radical Faith,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 63 (Spring 2009), 256–257, citing Peter Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from Beginning to End* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 104, 108; and Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 488. There is no doubt that the abnormal death count in the Soviet Union in the 1930s was extraordinarily high, and that this Stalinist carnage, extending past judicial murder into the toll exacted from forced collectivization and famine, reached into millions. See, for instance, S.G. Wheatcroft, “More Light on the Scale of Repression and Excess Mortality in the Soviet Union in the 1930s,” *Soviet Studies*, 42 (April 1990), 355–367; Alec Nove, “Victims of Stalinism: How Many?” in J. Arch Getty and Roberta T. Manning, eds., *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 261–274. The Davies discussion that Arnesen should surely have consulted – as the original source of his citation of the Lenin letter – is R.W. Davies, *Soviet History in the Yeltsin Era* (Birmingham, England: Centre for Russian and East European Studies/Macmillan, 1997), 6–19. Arnesen’s judgmental and skewed assault on Lenin needs to be placed alongside the more judicious comments relating to both Lenin in particular and how historians should relate to individuals and society in general in E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 54–55, where the Stalinist “cult of personality” is recognized as foreign to Lenin’s importance, marked as it was by a creativity which “helped to mould the forces which carried [him] to greatness.” As a counter to Arnesen’s poorly-informed anti-Leninism see also Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin: Revolution, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Pluto Press, 2008); Tariq Ali, *The Dilemmas of Lenin: Terrorism, War, Empire, Love, Revolution* (London and New York: Verso, 2017); and the classic discussion of Lenin’s late-in-life attempt to reorient the revolutionary road followed in Soviet Russia, Moshe Lewin, *Lenin’s Last Struggle* (London: Pluto, 1975).

The foremost opponent of Stalinism, Trotsky tended, for a time, to be exempt from caricature as the tyrannical bloodthirsty Bolshevik. Isaac Deutscher's still unrivalled biographical trilogy – *The Prophet Armed*, *The Prophet Unarmed*, and *The Prophet Outcast* – remains a monumental achievement precisely because it demonstrates vividly how Trotsky “nourished the seed of the future,” when a “Marxism cleansed of barbarous accretions” would not only result in the regeneration of the Russian Revolution but a transformation of the capitalist West.³⁷ Generations of dissidents read Deutscher's three volumes and received a firm foundation on which to appreciate how revolutionary communism was not merely what it had degenerated into under Stalinism. But for contemporary celebrants of “the death of communism” and the subsequent “end of history,” it is not surprising that a historiographic turn proclaims this nothing more than “myth,” obliterating historical distinctions that separate the original Bolshevik project from the later tyranny of Stalin's Soviet Union. Robert Service's 2009 Harvard-published and Hoover Institute-sustained biography of Trotsky is premised on the crude insistence that “Stalin, Trotsky, and Lenin shared more than they disagreed about.” Trotsky, we are told, “was close to Stalin in intentions and practice.” Reviewing Service's book in the *Sunday Times*, one literary don waxed enthusiastic over the turning of the historiographic tide. It had taken half a century, Robert Harris proclaimed gleefully, but in refusing the Deutscher-inspired Trotsky legend, Service effectively “assassinated Trotsky all over again.” The “pathology of the revolutionary type, and its murderous consequences,” was consequently laid bare: “Trotskyism was Stalinism in embryo.”³⁸

37 Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky, 1879–1921* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954); *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921–1929* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959); *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929–1940* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), quotes from 522–523.

38 Robert Service, *Trotsky: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), quotes from 3, 497; and Robert Harris, “Trotsky: A Biography by Robert Service,” *Sunday Times*, 18 October 2009. I am indebted to a lengthy and critical review by Paul Le Blanc, “Trotsky Lives!” *International Viewpoint* (December 2009), <http://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1786> which lays bare the many errors in Service's *Trotsky*, calling attention as well to its blunt ideological constructions. Subsequent reviews of Service's study have raised serious questions about his reliability on a range of factual and interpretive issues. See Scott McLemee, “Re-Assassination of Trotsky,” *Inside Higher Ed*, 8 July 2011; Bertrand M. Patenaude, review of Robert Service, *Trotsky: a Biography* and David North, ed., *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, *American Historical Review*, 116 (June 2011), 900–902. Service's attempt to portray Trotsky as Stalin's equal in his utilization of murder and terror parallels Arnesen's similar caricature of Lenin, discussed above. Patenaude's review pillories Service's misrepresentation of Trotsky.

Revisionist historians of American Communism are not so crassly anti-revolutionary. They nonetheless tend to underestimate or ignore the significance of Trotskyism as alternative, often distorting the history of the Communist Party and its Left Opposition. If their traditionalist counterparts posit Stalinism as an extension of Leninism/Trotskyism, rather than its repudiation, those wedded to “the romance of American communism”³⁹ adamantly insist on accentuating the positive elements of the Stalinist legacy. Too often this means ignoring what was decidedly negative in the history of “actually existing socialism.”

This is evident in James Barrett’s “rethinking” of the Popular Front. A strategic direction of the Comintern propounded in 1935, the Popular Front turned mainstream Communists around the world away from the ultra-left sectarianism of the Third Period (1928–34). As a direct response to the failures of the adventurist Third Period, evident in Hitler’s rise to power in Germany, the Popular Front (1935–39) was proposed against Fascism and constituted a Stalinist lurch to the right, an exercise in cross-class coalition building that inevitably suppressed the politics of class struggle.⁴⁰ Barrett champions this devel-

39 Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

40 Throughout this manuscript I will often identify the chronology of developments such as the Popular Front with a conventional dating, indicating when the Communist International officially proclaimed a specific programmatic development and when that orientation came to a close. In the case of the Popular Front, for instance, the Comintern officially declared this new approach at the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in the summer of 1935, and ended this approach, temporarily, with a 1939 declaration of a non-aggression agreement involving Germany and the Soviet Union, the so-called Hitler-Stalin pact. Yet as a number of scholars have noted, the move away from the preceding Third Period had been developing for some time, with indications over the course of 1932–34 in a number of countries that there was a backing away from the sectarianism and isolation of the Third Period’s “class against class” approach. This transitional moment, which seemingly echoed a return to the United Front orientation of Lenin’s Comintern with its suggestion of “united fronts from below,” actually negated understandings of the United Front in its continued sectarian refusal to countenance genuine leadership-to-leadership discussions among different left organizations, appealing instead for the ranks of other organizations to join Communist Party-led initiatives. This of course registered in Communist practices in the trade unions and social movements. In breaking somewhat with the hardened sectarianism of the Third Period, developments within this lead-up to the about-face of the declaration of the Popular Front in 1935 suggest that any rigid periodization will inevitably miss complications of importance and fail to capture complexities within the actual historical experience. For an unduly voluntarist discussion of this issue see Jonathan Haslam, “The Comintern and the Origins of the Popular Front, 1934–1935,” *The Historical Journal*, 22 (1979), 673–691. Note, as well, the discussions in John Manley, “Moscow Rules? ‘Red’ Unionism and ‘Class Against Class’ in Britain, Canada, and the United States, 1928–1935,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 56 (Fall 2005), 9–50; Cherny, “Prelude to

opment, accenting what was accomplished in the era of the Popular Front, but he does this, in part, by closing his eyes to some obvious and disturbing developments.⁴¹ For instance, Barrett lauds the popular frontist International Brigades that rallied committed antifascists to defend Spain's elected Popular Front government against the military insurgency heralded by General Francisco Franco. Yet Barrett says nary a word about the Stalinist liquidation of the *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*, or POUM, and the role of the Soviet Union in the murder of its leader, Andrés Nin. Victor Serge aptly observed that "it was impossible to defeat Fascism, while creating within the Republic a system of concentration-camps and murder directed against the most forceful and reliable anti-Fascists; those methods destroyed the moral standing of democracy."⁴²

Barrett deplores anti-communist reaction in the United States that led to the late 1930s/early 1940s jailing of Communist Party head Earl Browder for a passport violation that had taken place in the 1920s. This coercive atmosphere nurtured the creation of the House Un-American Activities Committee that played a central role in the escalating witch-hunts associated with McCarthyism in the 1950s. Legislation such as the Smith Act, used to indict and convict 11 leaders of the CPUSA for sedition in 1949, is rightly denounced by Barrett. Yet in the repudiation of this anti-communist record certain disturbing developments go unmentioned.

The first victims of the Smith Act were actually James P. Cannon and 17 fellow Trotskyists (and others who were acquitted or, in the case of one militant, committed suicide prior to trial), charged and convicted on five counts of "conspiracy to overthrow the government by force and violence" in October 1941, and jailed for up to 16 months when their 1943 appeal was denied. Not only did Browder, the Communist Party, and the vast bulk of its membership fail to defend these victims of state repression: among Communists and in significant popular frontist fellow-traveling corridors, the incarceration of the hated "Trotskyites" was greeted with applause. The *Daily Worker* castigated Cannon and the SWP as little better than "the Nazis who camouflage their Party under the false name, National Socialist Workers Party." In a pitch to Roosevelt to pardon Browder for his passport violation, the CPUSA offered advice on how to legally thwart the Trotskyists' attempt to appeal their conviction. A package

the Popular Front," 5–42; and in Klehr's account of "United We Stand," in *Heyday of American Communism*, 97–117.

41 Barrett, "Rethinking the Popular Front."

42 Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary, 1901–1941* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 335–337.

of documents prepared by Browder and the CP, and forwarded to the United States Department of Justice by Browder's lawyer, concluded with a denunciation of Cannon and other SWP leaders, claiming that they headed "a sabotage organization [that concentrated] upon the disruption of the war effort." If the "Trotskyites [did] not require a large organization," their "core of saboteurs" had a significant "underground influence." Removing this "fifth column" through jail sentences was advocated, and in doing this, Browder's final document declared, "you wreck a strong fascist weapon in America." None of this appears in Barrett's comment on rethinking the Popular Front.⁴³

One dimension of revisionist refusal is thus to ignore, downplay or misrepresent critique of Stalinism from the Trotskyist left.⁴⁴ This is evident in a begrudging refrain from revisionist historians that Stalinism perhaps did matter in the historical evolution of American Communism. This acknowledgement, however, is then often followed by avoidance of actual analyses of Communist Party policies, some of which were patently absurd and counterproductive, others being antithetical to fundamental tenets of Marxism, an interpretive trajectory that conditions shying away from examining egregious Stalinist behaviors that such analytic postulates licensed. As the Leninist conception of the united front withered on the vine of Third Period sectarianism, for instance, the Stalinist demand that true revolutionaries treat all other components of the left as "social fascists" to be shunned conditioned a tragic isolation.⁴⁵

43 On the *Daily Worker* quote and Browder providing the state with documentation of Trotskyist subversion see Philip J. Jaffe, *The Rise and Fall of American Communism* (New York: Horizon, 1975), 50–52, 174. Note as well George Morris, *The Trotskyite Fifth Column in the Labor Movement* (New York: New Century, 1945). For Cannon's response to Browder's evolution as a Stalinist see James P. Cannon interview with Joseph Hansen, "Autobiographical Material, 5 October 1956," 23–24, in James P. Cannon Papers, Archives, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, Box 1, File 10: "he started out as a revolutionist but he got sucked in by degrees in 1941 he was howling in the *Daily Worker* for savage sentences against us." Dorothy Healey and John Gates would later recall with shame the Communist Party's failure to come to the defense of Trotskyists imprisoned during the 1940s in the first Smith Act prosecutions. See Dorothy Healey and Maurice Isserman, *Dorothy Healey Remembers: A Life in the American Communist Party* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 114–115; John Gates, *The Story of An American Communist* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1958), 127. For a recent discussion of the first Trotskyist Smith Act trials see Donna T. Haverty-Stacke, *Trotskyists on Trial: Free Speech and Political Persecution Since the Age of FDR* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

44 Barrett, "Rethinking the Popular Front," recognizes briefly Trotskyist scholarship's critique of the historiography's tendency to ignore "the implications of Stalinism," but then proceeds as if this critique did not exist (535–537).

45 It is not surprising that the destructive consequences of the ideology of "social fascism"

Randi Storch describes the practices and consequences of such a policy, but then concludes that while the theory and practice of social fascism was a reality in early-to-mid 1930s Chicago, this did not mean all that much:

Ideas about the Soviet Union, education, activism, race, party discipline, factionalism, and social fascism sat at the intellectual center of Chicago's party culture. They reveal positions of party leaders that were occasionally embraced by those lower in the ranks and make left-wing anti-Communism during this period understandable. Viewed together, they help create a picture of party activists in the Third Period as idealistic, committed, militant, serious, and ambitious. Of course, they also show Communists to have been sectarian, pompous, and overeager to please Communist and national leaders. At the neighborhood level, party culture embraced all of these tendencies and encouraged others. In park forums, neighborhood meetings, language fractions, and shop groups, where most Communists experienced the party, an even more diverse set of behaviors and attitudes coexisted and sometimes contradicted those modeled and envisioned at the highest levels, revealing Chicago's party's quirks and particularities and the inability of its leaders to stamp them out.

Storch notes the case of Albert Goldman, a member of Chicago's Communist Party in 1932–33. Goldman adhered to the democratic centralist axiom that following organizational discipline was mandatory, but he insisted that it was not required of members to "believe in accordance." When Goldman "scorned a fellow comrade for railing against leaders of the Socialist Party at a mass rally against relief cuts," he was expelled, which suggests a certain Stalinist expectation that "socialist fascists" should never be defended. But the point that Storch stresses is that this turfing of the revolutionary lawyer "took so long" that it possibly allowed him "one whole year of haranguing against the party's position in the Communist classes he taught," activists thus coming in contact with "at least one party representative who disagreed with the social fas-

registered most decisively in the account of the Stalinization of the German Communist Party [KPD] by Hermann Weber, who stresses that such a policy, "prescribed in Moscow by the Comintern and willingly carried out in Berlin by the party leadership," reflected "the complete obliteration of all traces of democracy within the party." The "absurd slogans" that defined the Social Democratic Party of Germany as "the main enemy" insured that the Communist Party's capacity to organize a broad resistance to Hitler was constrained and the "burdensome consequences of Stalinization" helped pave the way for fascism's rise. See Weber, "The Stalinization of the KPD," 26.

cist line.”⁴⁶ Extrapolating from local control commission cases, Storch claims that Moscow’s grip on American communism at the level of particular locales like Chicago was “more complete in theory than practice,” which is, of course, something of a truism. All of this leads Storch to conclude that rather than “singular, totalitarian, or heavy handed,” Party experience was “spirited, dynamic, diverse, and maybe most of all continually negotiated by everyday Communists’ backgrounds, attitudes, and beliefs.”⁴⁷ This kind of orientation is given conceptual substance by statements like that of Edward P. Johanningsmeier, a biographer of William Z. Foster, who suggests that, “‘Stalinism’ is one example of a presumably rather monolithic political phenomenon that has recently been given more dimension by a number of careful, social, economic, and cultural histories.”⁴⁸

At issue in this kind of approach is the sense that the Communist ranks were composed of honest militants, advocates of social justice who found themselves battling vicious bosses and mendacious agents of the state. Revisionist histories often exhibit an admirable liking for their subjects, some of whom have worked closely with the younger historians studying them, providing interviews, documents, and important circles of sociability. It is difficult, in such circumstances, to recognize in the figures so often sitting across the table from you, those who embraced a politics of vituperative dismissal and worse.

46 Storch, *Red Chicago*, 83–84, 94. The difficulties with Storch’s argument are many. First, since Goldman indicates he accepted Party discipline, it is unclear if, in this particular case, he breached democratic centralism in his classrooms or in his criticisms of the comrade who attacked the Socialist Party “social fascists.” We do not know how Goldman acted, and whether or not his criticisms of the Party spokesman, for instance, took place inside Party circles or in a public forum. Similarly, we do not know what Goldman did or did not say inside his classrooms. No adequate evidence on these scores is presented, and since Storch’s cited sources are District Buro Minutes and Decisions on Disciplinary Cases from official Party sources their credibility could possibly, in specific cases, be questioned. The issue is complicated because Goldman was aligned with Cannon and the Trotskyists by 1 May 1933 and did make a speech on the united front at a Tom Mooney Conference that contradicted the Communist Party’s positions. See Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 114–115. Yet the notion that a small number of expulsions and demotions over resistance to implementing the full approach of the Party’s position on “social fascism” somehow establishes that Stalinism’s influence in Chicago’s Communist Party was weak in 1933 is unconvincing. This whole line of interpretation reduces the political significance of Stalinization to compiling individual stories of qualification rather than assessing the actual trajectory of a revolutionary party’s degeneration.

47 Storch, “‘The Realities of the Situation’: Revolutionary Discipline and Everyday Political Life in Chicago’s Communist Party,” 44.

48 Edward P. Johanningsmeier, “The Profintern and the ‘Syndicalist Current’ in the United States,” in LaPorte, Morgan, and Worley, eds., *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern*, 284.

Thus Eric Bentley long ago noted that Communists "have the worst record of perhaps any radical group that ever existed for intrigue, unscrupulousness, and inhumanity," adding, yet "very many Stalinists continued to be men."⁴⁹ And this was undoubtedly true.

As John Manley notes, in a perceptive and wide-ranging discussion of "Red" trade unionism in Canada, the United States, and Britain during the Third Period, the record of "ingenuity, courage, dedication, and heroism" among those adhering to the Communist International is historically undeniable. Manley nonetheless concludes that the issue is not one of admirable personal stands taken to create a better world. Rather, what is needed is a politics of interpretation not a narrative of caveat. Historian of German Communism Hermann Weber strikes a similar analytic chord: "We must distinguish between, on the one hand, communism as part of a social movement which desires to create a better world and, on the other, the communist regimes which wanted to protect and strengthen the power they had acquired by all possible means, including terror. This does not, however, change anything in the Stalinization thesis." Manley rightly insists that an instance of reinterpretation of the Party's line here, or a maneuver around a Comintern decision there, or, finally, an example of humane flexibility in assessing a comrade's deviations elsewhere, while indicative of how individual communists could seemingly circumvent Stalinism's overarching authority, must be assessed in a more rigorous framework of political comparison:

Set against Moscow's record of uprooting apparently entrenched national leaders, summoning others for political re-education, using Lenin School graduates as a mobile political commissariat, and installing compliant leaderships prepared to accept every twist and turn of the line as the last word in Marxist theory, these three national experiences reveal no significant degree of autonomy or initiative from below. The very disposability of the red union line showed that what really mattered was the power to make and break policy in the interests of Socialism in One Country. And as clear-eyed Communists had recognized since 1929, the leaders of that country held all significant power.⁵⁰

49 Eric Bentley, ed., *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 950, quoted in Lyons, *Philadelphia Communists*, 188.

50 Manley, "Moscow Rules?" 48-49; Weber, "The Stalinization of the KPD," 27-28.

This constitutes a powerful truth that revisionists skirt at their peril. It also necessitates situating individuals of genuine good intent who remained within the influence of Stalinism precisely where their political choices located them. Not to do so is to strip them of a good part of their agency. Judgmental condemnation is neither necessary nor helpful (except in cases where egregious behavior demands unequivocal disapproval), but an all-too-casual exoneration is no better.⁵¹

Too often, moreover, this kind of fixation on communists as the good fighters licenses a loose, ideological orientation echoing the pejoratives of Stalinism itself, masking important historical and political truths. This intrudes on Ellen Schrecker's otherwise excellent account of the ways in which the ugly repression of the Cold War was inflicted on Americans affiliated with the Communist Party. For instance, Schrecker actually includes Trotskyists among the ranks of a generalized "intelligence service" for McCarthyism's nasty network of witch-hunting anti-communists. Her willingness to lump Trotskyists together with vitriolic anticommunists, whether they be social democrats or defectors from the Communist Party and other Marxist organizations, ignores Cannon's and the Socialist Workers Party's record of persistent and principled opposition to McCarthyism. In stark contrast to the previous abdication of responsibility by Stalinists, Cannon and the SWP defended Communist Party leaders charged and convicted under the Smith Act. This stand was taken, moreover, in the climate of a 1950s witch-hunt far less hospitable to this defense than was the earlier environment of 1941–45.⁵²

Storch provides perhaps the best example of a revisionist historian whose fixation on local developments seriously misrepresents what happened historically as Trotskyists confronted Stalinists. She looks at the Communist Party

51 For instance, is Ramón Mercader, Trotsky's assassin, to be exempted from criticism because he imagined himself to be working for a just and good cause? Novels address this dilemma explicitly. Lillian Pollak's lightly fictionalized account of her own history as a Trotskyist, and a relationship she sustained with a childhood friend reared within a Stalinist household, suggests how rank-and-file Communist Party members could be drawn into events as distasteful as the murder of Trotsky under the animating pull of the Popular Front. The novel is nothing if not a reminder that the separation of leaders and led within Stalinism is not as easily accomplished as some revisionists would have it. See Lillian Pollak, *The Sweetest Dream: Loves, Lies, and Assassination* (New York: iUniverse Inc., 2008). More recently a powerful Cuban novel addresses similar themes with considerable artistry. See Leonardo Padura, *The Man Who Loved Dogs* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014).

52 Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are The Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 75–81.

in Chicago during the Third Period and fails to appreciate the extent to which the campaign of expulsion, slander, and physical abuse of Trotskyists in late 1928 and early 1929 set a particular political course. It could hardly be reversed by decisions made by local individuals that seemed to step somewhat outside official Communist edicts on how to handle "renegades." Chicago Trotskyists Albert Glotzer and Arne Swabeck, for instance, were given the heave-ho by the American Party's Lovestone leadership, along with three others. The expulsion took place at a District Executive Committee meeting that was clearly following the orders of national Party leaders in New York. Heading up the charge against the local Left Opposition was none other than Clarence Hathaway, an old crony of Cannon's fresh from two years of Stalinist training in Moscow. Cannon described Hathaway as making his "maiden appearance in Chicago as a political leader with a diploma from the Lenin School in his pocket."

The most critical expulsions of Trotskyists took place in late 1928 and very early 1929, but they continued, sporadically, well into the 1930s. In the case of pivotal Chicago figures such as Swabeck and Glotzer or their Illinois counterpart in the coal fields, Joseph Angelo, these excommunications from above involved no control commissions, local or otherwise, nor any other kind of evidentiary hearing worthy of the name. Storch does not mention these vitally important expulsions of key Chicago leaders who inclined towards Trotskyism, concentrating instead on local control commission disciplinary hearings from subsequent years that involved, for the most part, lesser figures. This is a case of following a certain body of evidence and elevating its importance. Storch does this by ignoring a prior set of documentation and the history that it illuminates, skipping over developments that are fundamental to understanding the meaning of later events. Once central budding Trotskyist personnel like Swabeck and Glotzer had been purged, with further expulsion of others associated with the Cannon grouping, then followed by the 1929 ejection of Lovestone and his adherents in the Right Opposition, the Communist Party settled into a period in which substantive factional dialogue was impossible. Trotskyists (especially those who would rightly be regarded as less consequential than figures like Swabeck and Glotzer) were not as threatening because the "Communist Party and its vast periphery seemed to be hermetically sealed." If dissidents remained they were likely isolated and could of course be subject to suspension or expulsion, or they might well be marginal and eccentric, in which case they could be routinely dismissed, or handled with a lighter, localized touch, something that was out of the question with the likes of those previously expelled by the national leadership. Cleansing of bodies like Chicago's Young Communist League, in which recruits came to the movement on a regular basis, often from

mass movements over which Stalinists exercised less-than-perfect control, was nonetheless judged to be necessary periodically.⁵³

The expulsion of Swabeck and Glotzer from a Party they had done so much to build and sustain (Glotzer was actually expelled twice, first from the Party and then from the Young Communist League) was an unambiguous case of local autonomy being subordinated to a national leadership's decision making. This bureaucratically orchestrated removal of two leading figures from the ranks of Chicago's Communist organizations can hardly be explained or negated by the anecdotes that Storch cites as evidence that the rank-and-file of the Party later treated Trotskyists somewhat benignly. Compared to the challenges Swabeck's and Glotzer's political critique of Stalinism posed to the Party leadership, subsequent instances of dissidence and how it was handled seem trivial indeed. Chicago's Communists allowed a woman expelled for Trotskyism

53 For the above paragraphs see Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 22–24; Arne Swabeck, “Unpublished Autobiography,” Chapter 13, “Autobiographies File,” Prometheus Research Library, New York, New York; “Swabeck, Glotzer Join Opposition; Expelled,” *The Militant*, 1 December 1928; Albert Glotzer to Max Shachtman, 26 November 1928, “General Organization-Secretarial Correspondence, 1923–1956,” Reel 20, James P. Cannon Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin. Much of the James P. Cannon–Albert Glotzer correspondence of this period appears in Fred Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon, Writings and Speeches, 1928–1931: The Left Opposition in the US 1928–1931* (New York: Monad Press, 1981), 38–78, where the quote on Hathaway appears on 49. For more on Hathaway see Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 336–347; and Joseph Freeman, *An American Testament: A Narrative of Rebels and Romantics* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1938), 521–526. The quote on the sealing of the Communist Party is from Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 92. On expulsions from the Chicago Young Communist League see “Ferment in the Chicago Y.C.L.,” *The Militant*, 10 October 1931. The view presented above is confirmed in other accounts, among them: Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History (1919–1957)* (Boston: Beacon Hill, 1957), 144–174; Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess: The Truth About American Communism* (New York: Dutton, 1940), 495. Storch notes the role of William Kruse in informing Jay Lovestone at the New York headquarters of those suspected of Trotskyism in Chicago. Like Hathaway he was a graduate of the Lenin School, and had been a factional figure in the Party associated with the Ruthenberg-Lovestone group. Storch, *Red Chicago*, 94–95; and for more on Kruse, Gitlow, *I Confess*, 425–429, 436, 459, 506–507. That the Chicago District was indeed in contact with Lovestone's New York headquarters, and often suppressed those considered to be friendly to Trotskyists, is evident in Alex Bail, District Organizer, to Jay Lovestone, 2 November 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL. On the Lenin School as a nursery of Stalinism in this period see John McIlroy, Barry McLoughlin, Alan Campbell, and John Halsted, “Forging the Faithful: The British at the International Lenin School,” *Labour History Review*, 68 (April 2003), 99–128; Joni Krekola, “The Finnish Sector at the International Lenin School,” in Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen, and Andrew Flinn, eds., *Agents of the Revolution: New Biographical Approaches to the History of International Communism in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 289–308.

to sell drink tickets at a New Year's social. They did not immediately repulse the dissident Left Oppositionists who hung around the Party bookstore and other venues. Finally, a comrade who sold *The Militant* was not so much expelled for his politics as he was exiled on the basis of his oddball personality – everyone knew “he was a nut,” and no one objected to his membership being terminated. Accounts of this sort can indeed illuminate how things appeared to those “on the ground,” but they are no substitute for an examination of larger developments, which insured that Chicago followed essentially the same course as New York, Toronto, Paris, London, and Berlin. As the remainder of this book will reveal unambiguously, Stalinist treatment of American Left Oppositionists was anything but gentle and tolerant. It relied, not on reasoned political argument and clear articulation of programmatic difference, let alone chance treatment of odd individuals, but on purposeful, orchestrated expulsion and ostracism, reinforced by slander, denunciation, and even violence.⁵⁴

54 Storch, *Red Chicago*, 80–82, 94–95; and Randi Storch, “‘The Realities of the Situation’: Revolutionary Discipline and Everyday Political Life in Chicago’s Communist Party, 1928–1935,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 1 (Fall 2004), 19–44. Storch also presents highly incomplete discussions of Chicago figures like Joe Giganti, a communist leader in the International Labor Defense. Her inward-looking focus on the local means that she misses much. For instance, she refers to Giganti’s expulsion from the Communist Party being precipitated by his having “written to an expelled Trotskyist friend.” That friend, however, was Martin Abern, one of the “Three Generals With No Army” first expelled for Trotskyism in October 1928. Not only that, but the letter Giganti had written was one of a number of documents burglarized from Cannon’s apartment. See *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, 561–569. Storch notes that Giganti protested to Chicago’s Communist leaders, but he also raised his objections with the Political Committee of the Workers (Communist) Party in New York. Giganti had strong words for the New York leadership having “wrecked the Chicago local of the I.L.D.” and referred to Chicago’s Communist leadership as “finishing the wrecking job.” There was clearly no doubt in Giganti’s mind that the national Political Committee was ultimately responsible for his expulsion and that it was violating his rights as a working-class, rank-and-file member of the Party. See Joseph Giganti to Political Committee, Workers (Communist) Party, New York, New York, 24 January 1929 (misdated 1928), Reel 9, Russian Center, PRL. Finally, in protesting his expulsion, Giganti was undoubtedly right in asserting that he was originally agnostic on the issue of Trotsky – enough, in and of itself, according to the Stalinist mindset, to justify being kicked out of the Party – but it was also the case that he was being drawn towards the Communist League of America (Opposition), and that precisely because that group oriented its political work towards the Communist Party, Cannon and other leaders encouraged those like Giganti to continue working with the Party wherever possible, including in the International Labor Defense. Glotzer wrote to Abern in mid-December 1928 that Giganti was being “forced into line thru the threats of expulsion.” See Al to Marty, 11 December 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL. Expelled from the Workers (Communist) Party, Giganti would formally join the CLA in 1930, and be, in turn, expelled

Cannon recalled that when he first lectured in Chicago on the Left Opposition and Trotsky's critical ideas, the Stalinists mobilized "a little gang" to attend the talk, but they could not make up their mind "whether they wanted to start a fight or not" and the meeting proceeded. One of the apparently more troubled of this Communist Party contingent was Boleslaw Konstanty [B.K. or "Bill"] Gebert, a veteran communist who had emigrated to the United States from Poland in 1918, worked in mining, risen to prominence in the Polish Federation of the Socialist Party, and found his way to Leninism and the revolutionary underground. Later prominent in Party circles in Detroit, Chicago, and Pittsburgh, Gebert's Third Period and Popular Front resumé would include leading roles in the Polania Society and the Slavic wing of the CP-front, the International Workers Order [IWO]. His credentials as an organizer of ethnic workers well established, Gebert was appointed director of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee [SWOC] Pittsburgh sub-district by Congress of Industrial Organizations [CIO] Vice-President, Phillip Murray. Later, in 1938–39, Gebert would play a central role in Communist Party activity in the Michigan automobile industry. When Gebert made his way surreptitiously to Cannon's hotel room in 1929, however, all of this was in his future, which would not unfold without certain "prince's favors." As "a conscientious Communist," Gebert "sympathized" with Cannon, expressing his disappointment at the ways in which dissenting ideas in the movement were being stamped out by the Party hierarchy. But Gebert could not face leaving the Party. Cannon suggested that, "He couldn't bring himself to the idea of breaking with the whole life he had known and

from it in 1935. As a counter to Storch's benign interpretation of the Communist Party's treatment of Trotskyists see Glotzer to Shachtman, 28 November 1928; 22 January 1929, Reel 20, JPC Papers. Storch's discussion of Chicago's foreign-language sections, and the loose way they related to Party discipline, echoes this general problem of assuming that because the Communist ranks did not always conform perfectly to Stalinist discipline, this somehow establishes that Stalinization was not a powerful, even decisive, development in the experience of American Communism. See Storch, "Their unCommunist Stand: Chicago's Foreign Language Speaking Communists and the Question of Stalinization," 263–282. Among the autonomous acts of Chicago's ethnic Communists cited by Storch to establish this position are racial prejudice on the part of Lithuanians and national chauvinisms that separated Yugoslav and Balkan comrades. Such "autonomy" is a strange basis on which to claim that Stalinism's influence was countered by local capacities to override its authority. The foreign-language sections in the history of the Communist parties of the United States and Canada were often able to hold on to certain kinds of limited autonomy, to be sure, and this reflected the opportunistic tendency of Stalinism to adapt to specific circumstances, but the leaders of these foreign language sections were subject to the disciplining hand of the Comintern. See, for instance, Joan Sangster, "Robitrytsia, Ukrainian Communists, and the 'Porcupinism' Debate: Reassessing Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in Early Canadian Communism, 1922–1930," *Labour/Le Travail*, 56 (Fall 2005), 51–89.

of starting out anew. This was the case with many. Various forms of compulsion affect various people. Some are afraid of the physical blow; some shrink from slander; others fear ostracism. The Stalinists employed all of these methods." Indeed, within two years, the Party had brought Gebert to heel. He took to the floor of a Chicago "United Front" Unemployment Conference organized by the Trade Union Unity League and, as District Organizer, denounced Trotskyists as agents of the bosses. He accused them of being racist defenders of Jim Crow laws, and told the workers assembled that the next time they ran into any "renegades who call themselves Communists" they knew perfectly well "what to do." "Yeah, we'll beat hell out of 'em!" replied a chorus of Communist Party functionaries in unison.⁵⁵

The Gebert of 1931 was a somewhat different man than the concerned activist that sought out a private audience with Cannon, the Left Oppositionist, in 1929. The face of concern creased deeply by weakness had turned into the distorted countenance of the bully. By the 1940s, Gebert was functioning as a KGB conduit during World War II, receiving payments from the Russian counter-intelligence forces for a Polish language publication. In the later 1940s, Gebert returned to his now Communist homeland to take up a sinecure as a lead-

55 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 70–71 and Martin C. Payer, "Bureaucrats Sabotage United Front in Chicago Jobless Conference," *The Militant*, 29 August 1931; Bill Gebert, "Trotskyism: Vanguard of the Counter-revolutionary Bourgeoisie," *The Communist*, 13 (January 1934), 62–71. It is of course possible that Gebert was sent to see Cannon by the Communist Party, tasked with finding out as much as he could about the nascent Left Opposition's activities and then reporting back on his reconnaissance mission. But Cannon clearly did not think this to be the case. I learned much about Gebert, and was prompted to look into his later development from reading Michael Goldfield, *The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 104–105, 150–151. There is also much on Gebert in Storch, *Red Chicago* and Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*. Gebert's role in the International Workers Order and in organizing steelworkers in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois is discussed in Thomas Walker, "The International Workers Order: A Unique Fraternal Society," PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1982, 50–51, 181–184. In 1938–39 Gebert was assigned by the Party to coordinate the work of Communists in the auto industry. There is reference to his role as a leading figure in the United Automobile Workers' Unity Caucus and the Party's industry fraction in Lichtenstein's biography of Reuther as well as in an exchange between Victor G. Devinatz and Nelson Lichtenstein on Walter Reuther's relationship to the Communist Party. See Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 124–125; Victor G. Devinatz, "Reassessing the Historical UAW: Walter Reuther's Affiliation with the Communist Party and Something of its Meaning – A Document of Party Involvement, 1939," *Labour/Le Travail*, 49 (Spring 2002), 223–245; Nelson Lichtenstein, "Reuther the Red?" and Victor G. Devinatz, "Nelson Lichtenstein and the Politics of Reuther Scholarship," *Labour/Le Travail*, 51 (Spring 2003), 165–176.

ing official in the state-controlled labor movement, as well as other prominent positions directly associated with Soviet international interests. Stalinism conditioned this kind of behavior, and the political degeneration it depended on and deepened, in a number of Bill Geberts across the length and breadth of the United States. The “prince’s favors” mattered, their influence registering in the behavior of individuals who were once dedicated militants but who evolved, through time, into something different. If not all climbed the ladder of Stalinist officialdom to secure the station of *apparatchik* that Gebert occupied, many took up the cudgels of anti-Trotskyism that was often an important step in securing Party recognition and prestige. Refusing to address this produces histories that are not only partial and incomplete, but at times inadequate and wrong.⁵⁶

Michael Denning, who prefers to sidestep “the story of political divisions,” views the Popular Front as a left progressive “culturalism” vastly more significant than a Communist Party policy. Baptizing the Popular Front a Gramscian “historic bloc” – a social movement encompassing not only Communist Party members, but also non-Communist socialists, Trotskyists, independent leftists, and liberal progressives – Denning understands it as “a broad and tenuous left-wing alliance of fractions of the subaltern classes” that included Frank Sinatra and Louis Armstrong as well as Paul Robeson. “[T]he rank-and-file of the Popular Front were the fellow travelers, the large periphery,” asserts Denning, and “the periphery was in many cases the center, the ‘fellow travelers’ *were* the Popular Front.” Eschewing what he regards as an antiquated fixation on politics and *the* Party, Denning focuses on leftist cultural continuities in varied artistic genres. He is quite right that popular frontist influences extended far beyond the Communist Party and included important cultural ramifications. He offers a rich and encyclopedic view of progressive culture in the 1930s and 1940s, commenting insightfully on ballads and cartoons, ghetto pastorals and jazz. As an act of cultural recovery, Denning’s work is a *tour de force*. Nonetheless, it lacks an essential dimension. As Alan Wald has revealed in three invaluable studies of the literary and intellectual left in the era of the Popular Front, there were poets, novelists, and essayists who fit uncomfortably at best in the framework that Denning has constructed so elaborately. This subterranean cultural front charted a path to the left of Stalinism and, in its art and activity, expressed impulses very different than those of popular frontist progressives.⁵⁷

56 Gebert’s KGB connections appear in John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 234–239.

57 Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996), 4–13. See, in contrast, the following works by Alan

Consider Denning's commentary on jazz in *The Cultural Front*. It skirts an important divide that existed among leftist New Yorkers who flocked to hear the innovative music's presentation in avant-garde New York clubs. B.J. Widick, for instance, recalled being enthralled by singers like Mary Lou Williams, whom he heard at the Village Vanguard. But Widick's presence in the audience was almost always on Mondays, designated "Trotskyist night" at the popular jazz forum. "[T]he Communists, who were much more numerous, poured into the nightclub on other evenings," and it would have been impolitic for Left Oppositionists, vastly outnumbered, to be present when Stalin's supporters packed the small venue. In his contribution to the history of the revolutionary left, then, as well as in his discussion of culture's left leanings, Denning glosses over palpable frictions. He gives more weight to a night on the town than to the many nights spent in meetings and forums, the days hawking newspapers and organizing rallies, and the hard slogging that went into enlisting bodies and minds in the struggle against capitalist injustice. Denning's rich cultural tapestry accents the fact that Trotskyists and Communist Party members might watch films on the Russian Revolution at the same Fourteenth Street movie theatre. Nonetheless, it fails to address why these opposing camps reacted differently to depictions of Stalin, and what it meant that the balcony-sitting dissidents had to suppress their laughter at certain representations of historical reality, lest "the Stalinist faithful in the downstairs section hear us and come up and start a fight."⁵⁸

This approach dovetails with contemporary interpretive trends that focus on the effects of communism in promoting a more liberal civil society, rather than the study of revolutionary organizations in their own right.⁵⁹ To be sure, nuanced examinations of how American society, culture, and politics were

M. Wald: *James T. Farrell: The Revolutionary Socialist Years* (New York: New York University Press, 1978); *The Revolutionary Imagination: The Poetry and Politics of John Wheelwright and Sherry Mangan* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987). Max Shachtman's earlier discussion of intellectuals in the 1930s provides a telling, if implicit, critique of the limitations of Denning's account. See Shachtman, "Radicalism in the Thirties: The Trotskyist View," in Rita James Simon, ed., *As We Saw The Thirties: Essays on Social and Political Movements of a Decade* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1967), esp. 40–43.

58 Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 25–26, 328–338; Paul Jacobs, *Is Curly Jewish? A Political Self-Portrait Illuminating Three Turbulent Decades of Social Revolt, 1935–1965* (New York: Atheneum, 1965), 34–35; Alan Wald, "Obituary: B.J. Widick, 1910–2008," *Solidarity*, 13 January 2009, www.solidarity-us.org/node/1893, accessed 6 March 2010.

59 This, I would suggest, is indicated by the enthusiasm generated by Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

influenced by the left can be of considerable value. But this is only one aspect of a larger story. The problems that can arise when this is lost sight of are evident in a statement by Jennifer R. Uhlmann. She proclaims the Cold War over, urging the importance of raising seemingly new questions. Paraphrasing Herbert Butterfield, Uhlmann suggests historians studying the revolutionary left need to become less partisan and more objective:

... we should not attempt to 'accentuate antagonisms' or ratify partisan cries – our work is not as 'god the avenger'. Rather, we should take these historical figures 'into a world where everything is understood and all sins are forgiven'. The time has come for those of us who can (those of us who approach the Cold War as history and not as wounded participants) to adopt a less partisan and more detached standpoint vis-à-vis Communist and anti-Communist history. ... Instead of histories of the CPUSA, we should write histories of the CP's influence on American life.⁶⁰

Such detached objectivity is an example of what E.P. Thompson once dubbed "the enormous condescension of posterity."⁶¹ It subordinates all on the revolutionary left to consideration, not on their own terms, but only in the elsewhere of mainstream American politics and culture.

4 Analytic Alternative

There is another way. We need not adopt the limitations of either the traditionalist or the revisionist historians of American communism. Nor should we restrict analysis of the revolutionary left to the ways in which it nudged the United States political mainstream in progressive directions. As Trotsky wrote in the preface to his *The History of the Russian Revolution*, "The serious and critical reader will not want a treacherous impartiality, which offers him a cup of conciliation with a well-settled poison of reactionary hate at the bottom, but a scientific conscientiousness, which for its sympathies and antipathies – open and undisguised – seeks support in an honest study of the facts, a determination of their real connections, an exposure of the causal laws of

60 Jennifer R. Uhlmann, "Moving On – Towards a Post-Cold War Historiography of American Communism," *American Communist History*, 8 (June 2009), 24. See as well Brown, *Historiography of Communism*, 77–89.

61 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 13.

their movement.”⁶² It is possible, then, to approach the history of American communism differently, to refuse the refusals of traditionalists and revisionists and the admonitions of those with little interest in the revolutionary left on its own terms. An interpretation guided by different premises is possible.⁶³

This analytic alternative will recognize the importance of *certain struggles* of the Communist Party and its rank-and-file against the power of capital and the state at the same time as it relentlessly exposes the defeatism of Stalinism. It will not collapse Leninism and Trotskyism into Stalinism, and while it will rightly deplore the bureaucratization of the Soviet Union's central bodies and the Communist International's apparatus, the primary weight of Stalinization will justifiably be located in the *politics* of revolutionary essentials and descent into a mercurial opportunism and worse. If the responsibility for this denouement rests rightly with the leading cadre, first among them Stalin and others at the helm of the Comintern, and second, those Party figures within national sections who succumbed to the sycophancy necessary to secure places of authority within the hierarchy of international Communism, such an analysis does not end there. The militants at the base who adapted to Stalinization, whatever their differences and divergences from the leadership they followed and however much their everyday struggles confirmed their commitment to just causes, cannot always easily be exempted from some responsibility for the choice they made to remain within the Stalinized Comintern and the Party that looked to it for inspiration.⁶⁴

62 Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Monad Press, 1980), xxi.

63 When confronted with alternative historical assessments of communism, traditionalists and revisionists tend to dismiss the message by insisting that it is really aligned with the other side. Thus, when I have outlined an alternative analytic of the kind proposed below, in which both the shortcomings of the Draper approach are addressed as well as those of the New Left-inflected histories, John Earl Haynes has suggested that the “chief target” of my “historiographic criticism” is Theodore Draper (Haynes, “Poison or Cancer: Stalinism and American Communism,” *American Communist History*, 2 (December 2003), 185). Randi Storch, in contrast, lumps me with Draper, Klehr, and Haynes, insisting (wrongly) that like Draper I interpret the early history of American communism as one of “foreign domination” and that although I do so from a different “political perspective” than Klehr and Haynes, like them I “remove Communists from their neighborhoods, workplaces and networks in order to show, with condescension and disdain, that Communists in the United States acted like Soviet puppets” (Storch, *Red Chicago*, 3, 232; and, less bluntly, Storch, “‘Their unCommunist Stand’: Chicago’s Foreign Language Speaking Communists and the Question of Stalinization,” in Laporte, Morgan, and Worley, eds., *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern*, 264.) I reply to Storch briefly in Palmer, “What Was Great About Theodore Draper and What Was Not,” 19.

64 There is of course a necessity to address Stalinism from below, as an outpouring of cultural histories of Stalinization within the Soviet Union have done, but not at the expense

This analytic alternative begins with understanding the Russian Revolution. In the blunt words of a brief primer on communism, Tariq Ali rightly concludes, “With the advent of Stalinism, everything changed.” Even those who gravitated from communism to anti-communism, such as Benjamin Gitlow, have often refused to collapse Leninism into Stalinism. Gitlow’s 1940 account refers to an American communist who worked closely with the Soviet secret police and was trying to extricate himself from Comintern intrigues in 1929. This individual remarked on the “great difference between the regime of Lenin and that of Stalin. Stalin rules by virtue of his power; Lenin ruled by virtue of his authority.”⁶⁵ We need an explanatory framework that takes account of this and addresses Stalinism seriously, as a way of approaching what went wrong with Communism in the United States. As Ali suggests, a historiography that

of addressing the significance of Stalinism from above. Cultural expressions of Stalinism, however much they were embraced by the masses inside the Soviet Union and by rank-and-file Party members in countries like the United States, were very much framed by the prior *political* consolidation of a policy of “socialism in one country,” which both countered the original Bolshevik/Leninist commitment to world revolution and rationalized the national consolidation and bureaucratization of Party life. There is a danger in some of the writing on “everyday Stalinism” in the Soviet Union in the 1930s of sliding too easily over the importance of the Stalinist counter-revolution in the political realm, representing Stalinism instead as a cultural phenomenon somehow separate from the late 1920s shift in political orientation and the consolidation of bureaucracy, followed by the acceleration of purges and terror in the 1930s. Oddly, in the revisionist writing on Communism in the United States, the accent is placed on instances of so-called rank-and-file autonomy, in which Stalinist practices and policies were either skirted or opposed, but there is very little discussion or exploration of how either a cult of Stalin or acceptance of Stalinism was embraced. The “everyday Stalinism” that forms a significant part of the literature on the Soviet Union in the 1930s is simply not replicated in studies of the Communist Party in the United States. See especially, in the Soviet case, the development of a cultural approach to Stalinism in the writing of Sheila Fitzpatrick, which is related to an understanding of the importance of Stalin consolidating bureaucratic power and the pivotal 1927–29 period of a break from past Bolshevik policy: Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin’s Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Fitzpatrick, ed., *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978); Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Fitzpatrick, ed., *Stalinism: New Directions/Rewriting Histories* (London: Routledge, 2000). Note, as well, the useful essay on Fitzpatrick, Ronald Grigor Suny, “Writing Russia: The Work of Sheila Fitzpatrick,” in Golfo Alexopoulos, Julie Hessler, and Kiril Tamoff, eds., *Writing the Stalin Era: Sheila Fitzpatrick and Soviet Historiography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1–19. On Stalinism from below see as well Gábor Tamás Rittersporn, *Stalinist Simplifications and Soviet Complications: Social Tensions and Political Conflicts in the USSR, 1933–1953* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic, 1990).

65 Gitlow, *I Confess*, 554.

follows the contemporary intellectual-political fashion in depicting Stalinism as nothing more than "the inevitable outcome of a socialist upheaval" is of little value.⁶⁶

It is necessary to start with an understanding of the objective conditions that limited the options available to the Soviet leadership under Lenin (1917–23). These included Soviet "backwardness," inherited from the Czarist autocracy; the constrained and unevenly developed Russian industrial base; and the enormous preponderance of peasant subsistence farmers. The catastrophic strain of World War I precipitated a crisis of the old order and helped to create conditions that led to the emergence of the world's first workers' state, through a relatively bloodless insurrection in October 1917. This fledgling Soviet regime was met with the unrelenting hostility of an array of powerful capitalist nations, which actively supported the counterrevolutionary Whites in the Civil War. The exigencies of this desperate struggle, as well as assassinations and attempted attacks on Lenin and other leaders, required active measures to suppress attempts to unseat the Bolsheviks by terror. All of this inevitably hardened the ruling apparatus and unfortunately necessarily normalized, to a certain extent, the use of authoritarian mechanisms. Undermining belief in the revolutionary process, a significant factor in the demoralization of many of the cadres of Bolshevism, was the defeat of the revolutionary wave in Europe, upon which the leadership of the Revolution had staked so much hope. The setbacks in Western Europe were at least partially attributable to mistakes resulting from the loss of revolutionary capacity in the Soviet leadership after Lenin was incapacitated in 1922. Stalin, whose talents were those of officialdom's prop to revolutionary initiative, proved a useful functionary, valued in certain limited ways by Lenin, but never entirely trusted by him. Trotsky's tendency to temporize and the instability of some of those drawn to his Opposition – such as Zinoviev and Kamenev – made things much easier for Stalin, whose role in making the Russian Revolution was considered insignificant in comparison to that of Lenin and the original corps of Bolshevik leaders, to consolidate his bureaucratic power.⁶⁷

66 Tariq Ali, *The Idea of Communism* (London: Seagull, 2009), 54, 52.

67 On the decisive importance of defeats in Western Europe, especially the failure of the German Revolution, see Pierre Broué, *The German Revolution, 1917–1923* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006). An interesting example of how understated contemporary Comintern assessment of Stalin's importance in the 1917 Revolution was as late as 1921 is William Z. Foster, *The Russian Revolution* (Chicago: Trade Union Unity League, 1921), 107–113, a chapter entitled "Some Revolutionary Leaders." Foster mentions Lenin as "the central figure in the Russian Revolution" and refers to Trotsky as "next to Lenin the biggest figure of the revolution." He goes on to discuss briefly Zinoviev, Bukharin, Kamenev, Kalenin,

Stalin was an experienced and relentlessly calculating figure. He soon proved, in a context of setbacks offering routes to a kind of seeming escape, an extraordinarily adroit (and ruthless) apparatus man.⁶⁸ In the increasingly unpropitious climate following the 1923 withdrawal of Lenin due to sickness and his premature death in 1924, Stalin embodied the conservative impulses of the increasingly privileged layer of administrators within the nascent workers' state. Weakening, then marginalizing, his opponents, Stalin was able to gain control of the levers of Soviet state power and, subsequently, of the Communist International. A critical juncture was January 1924, when the elections of the 13th Party Congress were rigged, changing the nature of how the Soviet Union was ruled. Critically important, however, was the necessity of eviscerating the theoretical foundations of revolutionary Marxism. Whatever the bureaucratic concentration of power within the emerging state apparatus of the Soviet Union, the caste-like control of a governing political layer was always subject to challenge and reconstitution should sound revolutionary principles and the ideals of communism be marshalled against it. In December 1924, then, Stalin first put forward his views on "socialism in one country," countering Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. An all-out assault on ostensible Trotskyism, which was little more than conventional Marxist wisdom embraced by Lenin and the Bolsheviks and confirmed within the Soviet revolutionary experience, ensued. By 1926–27, the revolutionary proletarian internationalism associated with the Comintern in the time of Lenin and Trotsky was extinguished. Under

Radek, Lunacharsky, Krassin, Tchitcherin, Lossovsky, and Kollontai. He suggests a group of other names that could be added to this list of leadership figures, but never mentions Stalin. John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World* (New York: Boni and Liverlight, 1919), a book which Lenin described as offering "a truthful and most vivid exposition of the events" of the October Revolution, again portrays Lenin, Trotsky, and others in their well-recognized leadership roles, but refers to Stalin largely in passing. Trotsky's *Stalin* is a relentless compilation of evidence establishing how insignificant Stalin was in the making of the 1917 Revolution, countering a subsequent Stalinist historiography falsifying this truth.

- 68 This accent on the control of the apparatus and Stalin's adroit management of this bureaucratization is fundamental to Trotsky, *Stalin*, and figures forcefully in Thomas M. Twiss, *Trotsky and the Problem of Soviet Bureaucracy* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2015). It is also central to discussions of the German Communist Party by Weber and Studer. See Weber, "The Stalinization of the German KPD," and Studer, "Stalinization Balance Sheet of a Complex Notion," 22–65. It also figures prominently in the sophisticated analyses of Stalinization by Moshe Lewin. See as an introduction to Lewin's approach, Moshe Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle* (New York: Pantheon, 1968); Lewin, "The Social Background of Stalinism," in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 2017), 111–136; and the essays in Nick Lampert and Gábor Rittersporn, eds., *Stalinism: Its Nature and Aftermath – Essays in Honor of Moshe Lewin* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992).

the banner of "socialism in one country," the mechanisms of Stalinist authority suffocated any serious hope of being able to extend the proletarian revolution internationally in favor of a policy of defense of "the socialist fatherland." This political retreat from the strategy of World Revolution, the cause that had animated the Bolsheviks and galvanized the global proletariat at its highpoint in 1919, was decisive in remaking the workers' state into something quite alien to the aspirations of its founders.⁶⁹ As a former Bolshevik and later defector to the West and the cause of anti-communism, Alexander Barmine, commented, "the struggle between the theory of the 'permanent revolution' and the theory of building 'socialism in one country' reflected two states of consciousness, one of active revolutionism, the other a retreat to domestic positions after defeat."⁷⁰

The practical consequences of this Soviet turn to Stalinism were decisive, even if they were at first difficult to discern. "Socialism in one country" soon turned a series of potential revolutionary opportunities into bloody routs, the most important of which were the abortion of the Chinese Revolution in 1925–27 and the tragic pillorying of the left in the Spanish Civil War.⁷¹ Indicative of the Comintern's Third Period failures was Hitler's rise to power and the obliteration of the German workers' movement under fascism. This catastrophe was not unrelated to the extremes embraced in the name of "social fascist" sectarianism, which isolated the powerful German Communist movement from many allies that could have been rallied under united front banners to oppose Hitler's brown shirt reaction.⁷²

69 For an illuminating discussion of the origin and development of the doctrine of "socialism in one country" see E.H. Carr's *A History of Soviet Russia*, published as *Socialism in One Country, Part Two* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1970), 11–61. There is, of course, much of relevance in Trotsky's subsequent response in Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution: Results and Prospects* (New York: Pathfinder, 1978). Important overviews of the 1913–23 upheaval include Larry Peterson, "Revolutionary Socialism and Industrial Unrest in the Era of the Winnipeg General Strike: The Origins of Communist Labour Unionism in Europe and America," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), 133–158; Wayne Thorpe, *The Workers Themselves: Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labor, 1913–1923* (Amsterdam: International Institute of Social History, 1989).

70 Quoted in Trotsky, *Stalin*, 524.

71 On China see Leon Trotsky, *Problems of the Chinese Revolution* (New York: Pioneer, 1932); Harold R. Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938); Gregor Benton, *Prophets Unarmed: Chinese Trotskyists in Revolution, War, Jail, and the Return from Limbo* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2015). On Spain see Leon Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution (1931–1939)* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973); Felix Morrow, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain* (New York: Pioneer, 1938), Pierre Broué and Emile Témime, *The Revolution and the Civil War in Spain* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2008).

72 On Hitler's ascent to power and the Communist International see Leon Trotsky, *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* (New York: Pathfinder, 1971).

As this was happening internationally, moreover, the Soviet domestic scene constricted in repression, with Stalin moving to marginalize, suppress, and terrorize all who might stand in his way. Not only dissidents and political opponents, but Party and government leaders, the commanding personnel of the army, and legions of scientists, engineers, and enterprise leaders were targeted. If Trotskyist Left Oppositionists were among those who initially found themselves subject to repression, resulting in a rash of expulsions from the Communist Party, banishment to outposts in Siberia, torture, and worse, Stalin, conscious of the need to consolidate power, also moved decisively against technical and professional elements. Such people could exercise influence on the economic and defense fronts that might well challenge Stalin as war threatened in the early-to-mid 1930s. His hold on the apparatus of the Soviet Union, the Party and its Politburo, and the Comintern incomplete but tightening in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Stalin used the state judicial system to launch some highly-publicized trials against a number of technical experts. Some of those subject to this onslaught of state repression had convenient Menshevik pasts, and they were scapegoated for the regime's failures, slandered in ways that prefigured later attacks on Trotsky and his supporters, whose Bolshevik credentials and revolutionary resolve placed Stalin's less impressive record of accomplishment and commitment to Marxist theory and practice under a spotlight of unwanted comparison. This perversion of proletarian justice, inaugurated at the height of the Third Period's adventurism, and paralleled by mass popular discontent with Stalin's policies of forced collectivization in the peasant-dominated countryside, rampant poverty, growing inequality, and a widening reach of authoritarianism, foreshadowed later developments. These included the orchestration of the Popular Front Moscow Show Trials, in which Stalin and his judicial henchmen liquidated the last vestiges of an older Bolshevik generation of revolutionaries.⁷³

This final act of "political genocide," as it has been named by Soviet historian Vadim Z. Rogovin, unfolded in a political climate different than that of the late 1920s and earlier 1930s, with Stalin having achieved an unprecedented dictatorial control over what Rogovin designates "the entire grandiose mechanism of state terror." The continuities and discontinuities evident as the Stalin-orchestrated Third Period (1928–34) gave way to the changed orienta-

73 The Moscow Trials are discussed in Arkady Vaksberg, *The Prosecutor and the Prey: Vyshinsky and the 1930s Moscow Show Trials* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990); John Dewey, et al., *Not Guilty: The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made Against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938). See also Trotsky, *Stalin*.

tion of the Popular Front (1935–39) reveal much. They suggest not so much an abrupt, principled turn away from sectarianism as a willingness on the part of a degenerating Communist International leadership to oscillate between adventurism dressed in the rhetorical garb of “class against class” militancy and rightist opportunism depending on the obvious needs of the moment. While certain significant economic gains of the Revolution of 1917 remained in the socialized control of capitalist property, the political regime headed by Stalin came to be characterized over the course of the 1930s by an unmistakable concentration of authority that was increasingly arbitrary, abusive, dictatorial, and even counter-revolutionary. Yet, internationally the prestige of a Soviet Union seemingly weathering the storms of capitalism’s world-wide Great Depression earned the land of workers’ revolution the loyalties of many in the liberal, progressive “cultural front.” The skeletons in Stalin’s Soviet closet were nonetheless spilling out into the theatre of ostensible socialism’s staged showings, and the costs of “socialism in one country” mounted throughout the globe, registering in Popular Front capitulations and calumnies as well as foreign policy pacts like the short-lived Nazi-Soviet non-aggression agreement.⁷⁴

This was a dismal record of opportunities squandered, revolutionary initiative sacrificed. Socialism stalled in the ruts of bureaucratic ossification, and was further complicated by the Stalinist brokering of a reconfigured Europe in the aftermath of World War II. A buffer zone of “socialist” economies was established in Eastern and Central Europe as the price capitalist power was willing to pay for the monumental losses the Soviets sustained in leading the “liberation” of Europe from Hitler’s awful designs, losses that soared, moreover, as Stalin insisted on decapitating the Red Army leadership assembled under Trotsky in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.⁷⁵ The Iron Curtain socialism that emerged from World War II was, however, born deformed, dependent as it was on Stalin’s power and program. A not dissimilar development would transform the Third World in the 1950s and 1960s, as anticolonial revolutions erupted in Algeria, Cuba, and Vietnam. The successful postcolonial states established in this period would also end up taking both material aid and political inspiration from the Soviet Union.⁷⁶

74 See, for one sustained argument and copious evidence Rogovin, *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror* and for a detailed examination of the history of one individual Weissman, *Victor Serge*. There is a succinct and useful discussion of these developments in Paul Le Blanc, *Leon Trotsky* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), esp. 103–125.

75 On Stalin’s vanquishing of the Old Bolshevik leadership of the Red Army see Trotsky, *Stalin*, esp. 611–614, 640–646.

76 For brief introductions to a complicated history see Alec Nove, *Stalinism and After* (Lon-

From possibly the mid-1920s, then, and even more obviously from the late 1920s and 1930s on, the forces of the international revolutionary left confronted not only the resolute opposition of global capital and its considerable capacity to constrain, but also the debilitating impediment of Stalinism. Stalinism relied on its entrenched authority as the regime that spoke for and exercised hegemony within the world's first workers' state, the place where many, throughout the world, thought socialism was being constructed. Yet this Stalinism was ordered by defeatism and degeneration. Its extensive organized apparatus of power, which included the Communist Party inside the Soviet Union and the widening reach of the Communist International, developed and implemented political orientations committed to anything but world revolution and the creation of socialist democracy. To be sure, this was not a seamless development, and Stalin's counterrevolutionary stranglehold over the world communist movement would not manifest itself clearly and unambiguously until the later 1930s, when its role in thwarting the Spanish Revolution and liquidating the personnel and program of 1917's historic accomplishment made it more and more difficult to mask fundamental betrayals. Those struggling against consolidating Stalinism had difficulty appreciating the full extent of the transformation Stalinism was realizing. This was especially the case in the United States, where militants, limited by their capacity to read Russian and lacking access to the full documentary record, grasped incompletely what was happening with respect to the degeneration of the Soviet revolutionary state. It took time for the lessons of this particular Thermidor to be fully learned.

To suggest that this history can simply be skirted in assessing American Communism, when the Party that revolutionaries in the United States joined and championed was part of the international communist movement and contributed, in its way, to sustaining the Stalinist project, is strikingly myopic. This is essentially the New Left, ostensibly revisionist, approach to American Communism, which highlights the struggles of Communist Party-affiliated men and women, doing so with too little appreciation of the limits imposed upon them by the Communist International's Stalinization. The traditionalist inclination, which sees the original Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and its embrace by American revolutionaries, as chapters in the discredited book of totalitarianism, fails to acknowledge even more, stifling important aspects of the past. These included revolutionary socialists' beliefs in and commitments to the radical reconstruction of life in capitalist America, and their understandings of

don: George Allen and Unwin, 1975); Michael Löwy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution* (London: Verso, 1981).

the positive role that could be played in advancing this cause by a Communist International whose leading figures had both made a revolution in Russia and were dedicated to seeing through successful revolutions abroad. By forcing histories of United States Communism into particular interpretive cul-de-sacs of denigration, traditionalists deny the agency of American revolutionaries, flattening a history of aspiration and struggle with an insistence that Moscow was always intent on imposing on its followers in the United States an untenable project of socialist transformation. Doing this means collapsing Lenin and Trotsky into Stalin, denying that between 1919 and 1928 the Communist International changed.

Arguably the most distinguished non-Marxist historian of the Russian Revolution, E.H. Carr, offered a response to just this kind of analysis and its many dismissals in the last published interview of his life. Disdainful of the political climate of reaction in the late 1970s, in which discussion of the Russian Revolution seemed frozen in a return to Cold War ideological stasis, Carr pointed out that to look at 1917 dispassionately and with consideration of its accomplishments was becoming increasingly difficult. To do so meant that you were likely to be branded a Stalinist. Carr was not prepared to submit "to this kind of moral blackmail." He insisted that, "The danger is not that we shall draw a veil over the enormous blots on the record of the Revolution, over its cost in human suffering, over the crimes committed in its name." This, after all, was an "obsessive topic in published books, newspapers, radio and television." Rather, what Carr feared was another danger: "that we shall be tempted to forget [the Revolution] altogether, and to pass over in silence its immense achievements." Finally, Carr insisted on separating Leninism and Stalinism, on establishing a periodization of the Russian Revolution that distinguished its Leninist origins from its subsequent Stalinist devolution.⁷⁷

Cannon, and his refusals, confirm this alternative analytic, illuminating its importance within the history of American communism. He and his comrades in the American Left Opposition were rare examples of revolutionary continuity. Their making and remaking as opponents of capitalism reached through the best in the traditions of indigenous American labor radicalism and the proletarian internationalism of the original Bolsheviks, the revolutionary work-

77 E.H. Carr, "The Russian Revolution and the West," *New Left Review*, 111 (September 1978), 25–36, quotes on 25–26. The "essential discontinuity" of Stalinism and Bolshevism/Leninism was argued strenuously in an essay first published in 1977, Stephen F. Cohen, "Bolshevism and Stalinism," and republished in Tucker, ed., *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*, 3–29. See, as well, Bryan D. Palmer and Joan Sangster, "Legacies of 1917: Revolution's *Longue Durée*," *American Communist History*, 16 (Nos 1–2 2017), 1–45.

ers state that they established, and the early Communist International that was to be the advocate and enabler of world revolution. Cannon, who could be excused for feeling that he stood almost alone as he penned his tribute to his forerunner, Albert Parsons, in 1929, is an enigma to those historians who identify with the perspectives of Theodore Draper. Cannon was neither a foreign import nor a puppet of Moscow. A true native son, Cannon spoke in the vernacular of an American working class that he knew intimately and which he insisted retained the potential to lead a social revolution. Nor can Cannon be assimilated comfortably to New Left-leaning histories that cannot bring themselves to acknowledge the extent to which the Communist Party in the United States, and the many admirable struggles that it influenced, was compromised by Stalinism as early as the late 1920s. This flies in the face of New Left attraction to, alternatively, the seemingly heroic “class against class” politics of the Third Period (1928–34) and the highwater mark of the much championed popular frontist breakthroughs in the later 1930s and 1940s. During these latter years Communist popularity increased, in spite of Stalinism, and the Party and its large periphery played an important role in advancing struggles of the jobless and for civil rights and mass production unionism. Such gains nonetheless always came with costs, including the Communist Party’s promotion of the class collaboration of the “no strike pledge” during World War II. Too often, as we will see in later chapters of this book, Stalinism marked a variety of struggles down with a politics of the liquidation of principle that led, ultimately, to actions culminating in demoralization and defeat.

Cannon is thus a persistent thorn in the side of all of those who refuse to address what was squandered and lost by the Stalinist leadership of a communist movement that was situated, by default, to lead American workers during the 1930s. This was a time of evident capitalist crisis and of labor upheavals that signaled how ready many workers were to wage impressive struggles that could transform the class relations of the United States. None of this, however, was exempt from the corroding influence of Stalinism, and the significant role it played in workers’ struggles. As Cannon wrote in the pages of *The Militant* in 1951:

The chief victim of Stalinism in this country was the magnificent left-wing movement, which rose up on the yeast of the economic crisis of the early Thirties and eventually took form in the CIO through a series of veritable labor uprisings. Such a movement, instinctively aimed against American capitalism, was bound to find a political leadership. ... [T]housands of young militants – not the worst, but in many cases the very best – were recruited into the Communist Party.

The story of what happened to those young militants; what was done to them, how their faith was abused and their confidence betrayed by the cynical American agents of the Kremlin gang – that is just about the most tragic story in the long history of the American labor movement. The promising young movement was manipulated, twisted and distorted to serve the current aims of Russian foreign policy. The young militants seeking education from the Communist Party, were dosed with demagoguery and double talk. They were taught that bureaucratic tricks and manipulations, and horse trades with careerist labor officials, were more important than the politics of the class struggle. ... the Stalinists demoralized the left-wing labor movement, ... robbed it of the moral resources to resist the reactionary witch-hunt instituted in the unions with the beginning of the 'cold war'.

State repression, wars waged by employers, and the opposition of trade union officialdoms were not sufficient to crush the left-wing of the US labor movement. Cannon acknowledged that all of this did indeed inflict serious damage to the advocates of revolutionary activism. But he observed astutely that other kinds of defeat were in fact more debilitating. Deriving from misleadership and treachery of the hegemonic "revolutionary" organization, these losses could produce a degree of cynicism that, as it accumulated over time, ultimately helped to insure that there would be "no moral capital for the future."⁷⁸

Theodore Draper once observed that Cannon was distinguished from so many other communist leaders of his generation because he "*wanted to remember.*" If anyone was in a position to make such a comparative evaluation it was Draper, who interviewed and corresponded extensively with the founders of America's Communist Party. His assessment of Cannon is surely highly significant. Draper felt that Cannon refused to give up on the ideals of his revolutionary past, writing that, "This portion of his life still lives for him because he has not killed it within himself." Having prodded Cannon to put together his memoirs of the early years of the CPUSA, Draper predicted that these recollections would be cherished by "students of the American labor movement in general and the American communist movement in particular ... for years to come."⁷⁹

78 James P. Cannon, "The Tragic Story," *The Militant*, 17 December 1951, in Cannon, *Notebook of An Agitator* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), 294–297.

79 Theodore Draper, "Preface," in James P. Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism: Report of a Participant* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1962), 11–12. Draper's empathy for Cannon confirms, in my view, that he is a more complex figure than the subsequent historiographic school that champions Draper's supposed perspective can actually acknowledge.

5 Cannon and the History of American Trotskyism

Draper's prediction has not come to pass. Cannon has hardly been embraced by students of the American labor and revolutionary movements. Liberal anti-communists who see themselves as extending Draper's original analysis pay little attention to Cannon, even though Klehr's first book, a study of the leading cadre of the American Communist Party, established that Cannon ranked as one of the most significant figures in the history of communism's United States beginnings.⁸⁰ Subsequent works by Klehr, Haynes, and their collaborators use Cannon, for the most part, to illustrate usual themes: as a Party leader he appealed for and facilitated the flow of "Moscow gold"; as a dissident he was subject to the ham-fisted acts of suppression characteristic of official Communism's approach to those who refused to knuckle-under to the arbitrary dictates of Stalinist bureaucracy.⁸¹ In New Left-inflected histories, scant attention is paid to Trotskyism. Cannon figures lightly, if at all, in most revisionist accounts. Denning, referring to the Trotskyist leader's "orthodox Leninism," may well provide insight into why a New Left would shun serious engagement with Cannon. Maurice Isserman suggests, in ways following a routine typecasting, that in American Trotskyism's division of labor – with Cannon associated with a supposedly anti-intellectual, trade unionist oriented older left and his comrade Max Shachtman better suited to interact with college students and youth – it was Shachtman "who had been entrusted with the Left's future."⁸²

For my earlier discussion of Draper's complicated historiographic meaning see Palmer, "Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism," 157–166.

80 Harvey E. Klehr, *Communist Cadre: The Social Background of the American Communist Party Elite* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 110–111. Klehr, in conjunction with the *Washington Post*, later drew up a list of the 16 top Communists in United States history. Included were major figures associated with the Communist Party, such as Earl Browder and William Z. Foster, but also named were Party leaders like Eugene Dennis and Gus Hall, early advocate of the Russian Revolution, John Reed, and figures associated with Cold War espionage, Alger Hiss and Whitaker Chambers. Cannon was not considered. See "America's Top Communists of All Time," *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/americas-to-communists-of-all-time>, 23 September, 2013, and Dylan Matthews, "The Washington Post Picked Its Top American Communists. Wonkblog begs to differ," <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2013/09/26>, both accessed 11 March 2019.

81 Klehr, Haynes, and Firsov, *Secret World of American Communism*; Klehr, Haynes, and Anderson, *Soviet World of American Communism*.

82 Cannon receives no entry in Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Harvey Kaye, eds., *The American Radical* (New York: Routledge, 1994), and in Denning's *The Cultural Front*, 432 the mention of Cannon is predictably limited and limiting, as it is in the more extended commentary in Maurice Isserman, *If I Had A Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth*

The irony is that while the New Left ostensibly broke from the Old Left, it ended up producing histories of American Communism that were incredibly uncritical of Stalinism, often extolling the accomplishments of the CPUSA in the 1930s and 1940s.⁸³ Cannon, contrary to the expectations of Draper, has thus been relegated to Marxism's United States margins by the vast majority of historical commentators.

The sole sustained academic attempt to discuss Cannon and the emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, Constance Ashton Myers' *The Prophet's Army* (1977) is characterized by dismissive hostility. Trotskyism is presented as the ideology of an other-worldly sect, with Cannon as a high priest surrounded by hand-raising "henchmen." Myers claims that, "When Trotskyists formed a real party they duplicated the Stalinists' approach to doctrinal dissent" and that they "spoke a language either unintelligible or distasteful to working people," who "neither heard what they were saying, nor cared." *The Prophet's Army* is a lightly-researched book that relies too often on previously-published sources and interviews with individuals like Max Shachtman who had once played prominent roles in Trotskyism's history but, by the time Myers talked to them in the early 1970s, had long since renounced their former revolutionary views. Myers' book, as liable to be wrong on details as it is acerbic in approach, bypasses much of relevance in the history of American Trotskyism and is unreliable as a source of information on Cannon or the movement he led.⁸⁴ Unfortunately, many studies of Trotsky's Fourth International, which

of the New Left (New York: Basic, 1987), esp. 35–76. While more balanced, this approach to Cannon is also evident in Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 56–57. As a counter to Isserman's claim that it was Shachtman who had been entrusted with the Left's future see Fred Halsted, *Out Now! A Participant's Account of the American Movement Against the Vietnam War* (New York: Monad, 1978), 721, quoting Julius Jacobson, "Neo-Stalinism: The Achilles Heel of the Peace Movement and the American Left," *New Politics*, 11 (Summer 1976), which noted that Shachtman's position on the Vietnam war was that of a hawk to the right of the center wing of the Democratic Party, a politics conditioned by Shachtman's subservient relation to the AFL-CIO labor bureaucracy.

83 See, for instance, Lyons, *Philadelphia Communists*; Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1982).

84 Constance Ashton Myers, *The Prophet's Army: Trotskyists in America, 1928–1941* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977). See also Myers, "American Trotskyists: The First Years," *Studies in Comparative Communism*, 10 (Spring/Summer 1977), 133–151. By the early 1960s, for instance, Max Shachtman, who spent half of his adult life as an uncompromising advocate of the revolutionary left, had renounced the politics that animated him from his youth into the 1940s. In a 1963 interview, Shachtman concluded that Trotskyism was a dead end, and that the revolutionary left could only have an impact by being part of a larger, mass party. This led him to the belief that the left could effectively realign with the Democratic Party.

situate Cannon on a larger political canvas, are little better.⁸⁵ Somewhat more useful, but limited by the fact that it presents more gloss than substantive engagement with Cannon and the history of Trotskyism's development in the United States, is Robert Alexander's encyclopedia-like *International Trotskyism, 1928–1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement*.⁸⁶

The best work on Cannon and Trotskyism in the United States published to date comes out of the tradition of the Left Opposition itself. However fractious and fragmented members of this political current have become, they have produced and kept in print a library of books and collections of speeches and other documents either written by Cannon himself or critical to understanding his historical development and elaboration of the politics of Trotskyism. Little read outside the concentric circles of those who continue to value the ideas of Lenin and Trotsky as the embodiment of Marxist thought and action, these texts constitute significant contributions to the anti-Stalinist revolutionary left.⁸⁷ They are enhanced by a set of historical essays and reconsiderations

See Max Shachtman, "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 300–305, Oral History Research Office, No. 488, Columbia University, New York, New York. Drucker's *Max Shachtman and His Left* has more sensitivity to Trotskyism's United States beginnings, but it is somewhat thin in its coverage of the formative years of the American Left Opposition, examining the 1929–39 period in a mere 70 pages. It misses a great deal, including much of direct relevance to understanding Shachtman.

- 85 Inadequate assessments of Cannon with respect to international Trotskyism, mostly focusing on periods subsequent to the years addressed in this volume, appear in Barry Lee Woolley, *Adherents of Permanent Revolution: A History of the Fourth (Trotskyist) International* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999); Jan Willem Stutje, *Ernest Mandel: A Rebel's Dream Deferred* (London: Verso, 2009); Daniel Gaido and Velia Luparello, "Strategy and Tactics in a Revolutionary Period: U.S. Trotskyism and the European Revolution, 1943–1946," *Science & Society*, 78 (October 2014), 484–512. These sources nonetheless suggest important areas of critique, which are highlighted in Emile Gallet, "The swp (US) in the 'American Century,'" *Permanent Revolution*, 7 (Spring 1988), 101–125 and Bryan D. Palmer, "The Personal, the Political, and Permanent Revolution: Ernest Mandel and the Conflicted Legacies of Trotskyism," *International Review of Social History*, 55 (Spring 2010), 117–132.
- 86 Robert Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1928–1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991). If it does not address the Alexander compilation's shortcomings with respect to United States Trotskyism, something of the problems present in those sections addressing Cannon's history can be gleaned from Al Richardson, "Review: Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985*," *Revolutionary History*, 4 (Spring 1993).
- 87 Among these texts are Cannon's major publications: *Socialism on Trial: The Official Court Record of James P. Cannon's Testimony in the Famous Minneapolis 'Sedition' Trial* (New York: Pioneer, 1942); *Struggle for a Proletarian Party* (1943); *History of American Trotskyism* (1944); *Notebook of an Agitator* (1958); and *First Ten Years of American Communism* (1962);

on Trotskyism in the United States that provide suggestive overviews developed out of the accessible published sources. While these interpretive forays are substantial and stimulating, they are also restricted in their reach into the largely untapped archives of the major organizations in which Cannon figured forcefully.⁸⁸

Letters from Prison (New York: Merit, 1968); *Speeches for Socialism* (New York: Pathfinder, 1971); and *Speeches to the Party: The Revolutionary Perspective and the Revolutionary Party* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973). An invaluable collection of reminiscences, published after Cannon's death, is *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*. Collections of writings and speeches include: *Writings and Speeches: The Left Opposition in the U.S., 1928–1931* (New York: Monad Press, 1981); *Writings and Speeches: The Communist League of America, 1932–1934* (New York: Monad Press, 1985); *Writings and Speeches, 1940–1943: The Socialist Workers Party in World War II* (New York: Pathfinder, 1975); *Writings and Speeches, 1945–1947: The Struggle for Socialism in the 'American Century'* (New York: Pathfinder, 1977). Invaluable documentary collections, including much material not written by Cannon, have been produced by the Prometheus Research Library: *Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism* (1992); and *Dog Days: James P. Cannon vs Max Shachtman in the Communist League of America, 1931–1933* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 2002). See also Sean Matgamna, ed., *The Fate of the Russian Revolution: Lost Texts of Critical Marxism, Volume 1 – Max Shachtman, Hal Draper, CLR James, Al Glotzer, Joseph Carter, Leon Trotsky and Others* (London: Phoenix Press, 1998); Matgamna, ed., *The Two Trotskyisms Confront Stalinism: The Fate of the Russian Revolution, Volume 2: Debates, Essays, and Confrontations – Harry Braverman, James P. Cannon, Albert Glotzer, Albert Goldman, Louis Jacobs, CLR James, Felix Morrow, Max Shachtman, Natalia Sedova Trotsky, Leon Trotsky, and Others* (London: Workers Liberty, 2014). I have recently been involved in a Paul Le Blanc-inspired three-volume documentary compilation. See Le Blanc, Palmer, Bias, and Pollack, eds., *US Trotskyism, 1928–1965: Part 1: Emergence – Left Opposition in the United States*; Paul Le Blanc, Bryan Palmer, and Thomas Bias, eds., *US Trotskyism, 1928–1965: Part II: Endurance – The Coming American Revolution* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019); Paul Le Blanc and Bryan Palmer, eds., *US Trotskyism, 1928–1965: Part III: Resurgence – Uneven and Combined Development* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019).

- 88 George Breitman, Paul Le Blanc, and Alan Wald, *Trotskyism in the United States: Historical Essays and Reconsiderations* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996). A recent comment on Cannon, Corey Ansel, "American Trotskyist: The Heritage of James Cannon," *American Communist History*, 14 (No. 1, 2015), 41–55 attempts an assessment of Cannon's legacy, particularly as it relates to the author's view of the inadequacies of the contemporary Trotskyist left, especially the Socialist Workers Party. Because of its brevity and its purpose of using Cannon to pass judgement on the current state of left politics, as well as its lack of original research, Ansel's article is limited in what it tells us about Cannon and the formative years of American Trotskyism addressed in this book. For my brief comments on Cannon's legacy see Bryan D. Palmer, "James Patrick Cannon: Revolutionary Continuity and Class-Struggle Politics in the United States, 1890–1974," in Palmer, *Marxism and Historical Practice, Volume II: Interventions and Appreciations* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 272–293.

Almost 35 years ago Alan M. Wald wrote a pioneering book on the New York intellectuals in which he explored how, in the 1930s, Trotskyism influenced a pivotal layer of Jewish internationalists, dissident philosophers, and radical modernists. This interface of culture and revolutionary communism led to the expansion of the anti-Stalinist milieu in which Cannon figured prominently. Outstanding writers, thinkers, and artists rallied to the defense and ideas of Leon Trotsky, but so too did militant workers – in New York’s hotels, among teamsters in Minneapolis, and on San Francisco’s waterfront. Although a relatively short-lived phenomenon, this development nonetheless left its mark indelibly on the class relations of the United States. Wald ended his book with words that can serve as an introduction to my own study of Cannon and his struggle to build Trotskyism in the United States and throughout the world:

We can now look back over the seventy years that have elapsed since the Russian Revolution and assess for ourselves the meaning of various debates and the validity of policies, positions, and attitudes. We need to integrate this sort of theoretical consciousness about political strategy with careful empirical research into the experience of the previous generation of Marxists. In that way we will be able to advance the recovery of our radical heritage, to correct the political amnesia that has marred our legacy, and to redeem the promise of socialist intellectuals first augured in the writings of Marx and Engels.⁸⁹

Cannon, who lived so much of his life as a revolutionary excluded from “the prince’s favors,” can perhaps favor us with fresh hopes and new insights in our “dog days” of late capitalism.

89 Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 374.

An American Left Opposition

1 Exile off Main Street

United States Trotskyism imploded within the Workers (Communist) Party on 27 October 1928. In a 19-point appeal to rank-and-file communists, released to the Political Committee and read before it, James P. Cannon, Max Shachtman, and Martin Abern struck hard blows against what they condemned as the opportunism and bureaucratization of the American Party of the Communist International [Comintern/CI]. Acute problems of political leadership within the apparatus of revolution in the United States were “organically bound up with the fundamental questions confronting the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Comintern, and cannot be solved separately from them.”

Declaring themselves “For the Russian Opposition!” the trio was dubbed the “Three Generals With No Army” by Jay Lovestone’s factional lieutenant and vehement Trotsky-baiter, Bertram D. Wolfe. These generals attacked what they labeled a “right danger” within the Workers (Communist) Party, castigating the “irresponsible adventurism, ... factional degeneration, and bureaucratic corruption of the Lovestone group” that had attained the commanding heights of United States revolutionary leadership. They also broke decisively from the William Z. Foster-Alexander Bittelman-led forces that, in the view of the Left Oppositionists, were engaged in maneuvers to moderate the necessary struggle against the rightward trajectory of the American Party. Insisting that discussion had been stifled within both the Communist International and the American Communist movement, Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern called on all Party members to study the developing body of documentation. Doing so, they claimed, would reveal the erosion of basic Leninist principles, calling into question not only how Communist parties functioned but also their relation to events of momentous importance in the struggle to extend the World Revolution.

Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern declared that there now existed within the ranks of American communists those prepared to fight for “Party democracy, against bureaucratism and for a regime of genuine Leninist self-criticism.” Refusing to countenance any longer the crime of “violence and persecution against tried and loyal Bolsheviks,” the three signatories of the dissenting document demanded the right of all communists to read and discuss, to arrive at judgment and opinion free of “an atmosphere of prejudice, misrepresentation,

terrorism, outlawing of all thought and inquiry, and the substitution of official say-so for the study of documents and facts on disputed questions.” Singling out for particular emphasis “attempts to revise ... basic Marxist-Leninist doctrine with the spurious theory of ‘socialism in one country,’” the trio insisted that it had been Leon Trotsky, next to Lenin the most outstanding leader of the Russian Revolution, who had been fighting for much of the mid-to-late 1920s to right the wrongs of a Communist International that was moving decidedly and disastrously away from fundamental, internationalist principles. In this sense, Trotsky was understood to be defending revolutionary Marxism. The living embodiment of this tradition were the positions taken in the first four Congresses of the Communist International. Trotskyism was thus nothing more than Leninism in the epoch of Stalinist degeneration. The doctrine of “socialism in one country” was linked to the bloody defeat of the Chinese Revolution, the obvious conservatism of the Soviet-influenced Anglo-Russian Committee in the midst of the British General Strike, and the alarming growth of bureaucracy all too evident in the governance of the Communist International and the Soviet Union. Obviously guided by a reading of parts of Trotsky’s “The Draft Program of the Comintern: A Criticism of Fundamentals,” which Cannon had smuggled out of the Soviet Union after the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International in the summer of 1928, the recently convinced Left Oppositionists insisted that it was a “revolutionary duty to defend” their views before the Party membership.¹

The consequences of this declaration were immediate. Once Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern dropped their bombshell, defending Trotsky and demanding a discussion of the Left Opposition’s critique of the Communist International’s programmatic orientation, their time as members of the Workers (Communist) Party came to an unceremonious end. All three worked as paid Party functionaries, employed in positions of authority in the International

1 The above paragraphs refer to “For the Russian Opposition! Against Opportunism and Bureaucracy in the Workers Communist Party of America! A Statement to American Communists by James P. Cannon, Martin Abern, and Max Shachtman,” original 27 October 1928, reprinted in *The Militant*, 15 November 1928; James P. Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism: Report of a Participant* (New York: Pioneer, 1944), 55; “The Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 1963, Number 488, Oral history Research Office, Columbia University, New York, New York, 170–175; Bertram D. Wolfe, *The Trotsky Opposition: Its Significance for American Workers* (New York: Workers Library, 1928); Wolfe, “The Three Generals with No Army,” *Daily Worker*, 27 November 1928. For the immediate background to the Cannon, Shachtman, Abern document and their expulsion see Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 316–349.

Labor Defense (ILD) organization. They were stripped of their responsibilities in that realm prior to Cannon reading the declaration. The only unfinished business was to banish them from the Workers (Communist) Party, terminating their involvement in the Political Committee and the Central Executive Committee. As Cannon recalled, "We were expelled and out of there a few minutes later. The 'jury' didn't bother to leave the box."²

Trotskyism, in its American origins, as in its Soviet beginnings, was a lonely, difficult pursuit. "We didn't start with a victory," James Cannon recalled in 1973, adding that the beginnings of Trotskyism were associated with "a terrible defeat of the exile of Trotsky to Alma Alta then later to Turkey." In the United States, the expulsion of Cannon and two of his closest comrades, Shachtman and Abern, came only after a series of marathon October 1928 Political Committee meetings of the Central Executive Committee of the Workers (Communist) Party. Cannon's calculated reading of the prepared statement, "For the Russian Opposition!," proved the culmination of these drawn out kangaroo court proceedings. Expulsion of the oppositionists left American Trotskyism isolated, branded with the stigma of "defeat." As the *Daily Worker*, official publication of United States Communism, printed more and more vociferous attacks on Trotskyism in the aftermath of Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman being deprived of their International Labor Defense positions and being kicked out of the Party, its pages were notable for "celebrating a victory." Cannon's cause, in contrast, might be viewed as "in deep trouble." It "certainly didn't have too bright a prospect to begin with," Cannon wrote in 1944, adding that as he, Shachtman, and Abern left the proceedings that terminated irrevocably their membership in the American Party of the Communist International, "the three of us ... felt pretty lonely."³

2 James P. Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism: Report of a Participant* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1962), 223. Cannon provided a later statement on why he and other elements within American Communism led the struggle for the regeneration of the Workers (Communist) Party in 1928 in "The Degeneration of the Communist Party and the New Beginning," *Fourth International*, 15 (Fall 1954), 121–127.

3 Harry Ring interview with James P. Cannon, 24 October 1973, 4, in possession of the author [hereafter Ring interview]; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 55. For the beginning of the official Party attack on Trotskyism see "The Struggle Against Trotskyism and the Right Danger," *Daily Worker*, 16 November 1928; "Communists in New York Hit at Trotskyism," *Daily Worker*, 21 November 1928; "Kansas District Hits Trotskyism," *Daily Worker* 23 November 1928; "Detroit Workers Hit Trotskyism," "Minneapolis Hits Trotskyism, Right Danger," "Young Workers League Membership Meet Hits Trotskyism, Right Danger," *Daily Worker*, 24 November 1928; "District 2 Hits Right Danger, Trotskyism," *Daily Worker*, 30 November 1928; Bertram D. Wolfe, "Three Generals With No Army," *Daily Worker*, 27 November 1928; "Comintern Demands Full Mobilization Against Trotskyism," *Daily Worker*, 3 December 1928; "Youth Against Trotskyism,

Almost 39 years of age, Cannon was now exiled from any metaphorical homeland that he could rightly have considered his chosen community. With the reading of one political statement he had severed his officially-recognized ties with the Soviet Union, a revolutionary undertaking that had inspired him since its birth. For a decade his every waking moment had been inextricably entwined with the difficult struggle to build a Bolshevik Party in the most vibrant and powerful capitalist nation on earth. His energies and desires fused in what he always envisioned would be a life-long commitment to advancing the World Revolution, drawing on the experience and guidance of the leaders of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Soviet experiment they charted. Cannon's purpose in life became helping to lead American workers in the overthrow of the exploitative system that was dependent on both their labor and their subservience. And he believed strongly that for this to happen, a Leninist communist party was an absolute necessity. As much as any other individual, moreover, the Kansas-born Cannon had contributed decisively to the founding and building of what he once thought would be such a revolutionary party in the United States.⁴ Now, in 1928, he walked to his 19th Street and Second Avenue New York apartment with two younger comrades, knowing that the daunting task of revolutionary organization had, in some ways, to begin anew.

The authority that Cannon looked to was not now, as it had been in 1918–21, the victorious proletarian state of the world's first successful socialist revolution. That concrete achievement could be resurrected, but its leadership, and the powerful global organization that it developed and nurtured in the form of the Communist International, was now compromised. Such leaders as could be discerned in the nascent Left Opposition, Leon Trotsky foremost among them, were not even accessible to dissidents like Cannon. Once part of a world movement with an undeniable presence, however marginalized, Cannon had taken up the banner of a counter movement that was ostensibly "in decline, leaderless, suppressed, isolated, practically non-existent." Trotsky's documents, not in their entirety, but in bits and pieces, were what kept the ideal of Bolshevism alive. As for a working relationship with the leader of the Left Opposition – that was out of the question in 1928. "[W]e had no contact with Comrade Trotsky," Cannon later recalled emphatically. "We didn't know whether he was dead or alive. There were reports of his being sick. We never dared to hope that we

Right Danger," *Daily Worker*, 10 December 1928; Note also, *Daily Worker*, 8 January 1929, where correspondence among American Trotskyists is reprinted. See also Louis Stanley, "Ghost of 'Trotskyism' Turns Up In America But is Promptly Squelched," *New Leader*, 11 December 1928.

4 For background see Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*.

would ever see him or have direct contact with him." The revival of revolutionary internationalism as expressed in the theses of the Russian Left Opposition galvanized Cannon and his allies. "We broke the blockade against the ideas of Trotsky and his co-workers in Russia," Cannon wrote with pride in 1944.⁵

The choice to pursue this course of action was not made cavalierly, and it left Cannon, in his own understated word, "uneasy." He knew that his days and evenings lounging about the Party office were over. In declaring for the Russian Left Opposition he was well aware of the price that would be paid: "I knew it was going to cost me my head and also my swivel chair." There was nonetheless the liberating prospect of ending "the log-jam of unprincipled factionalism" that had straight-jacketed the revolutionary efforts of Cannon and so many others over the course of the late 1920s. "All the little organizational machinations, that had loomed up so big in the old squabbles, were just thrown off like an old coat," Cannon would later enthuse. Trusting that American Bolshevism was about to be reborn, Cannon was unduly optimistic about the prospects of convincing his former comrades in the Workers (Communist) Party that the revolutionary road lay, not with those now ensconced in positions of power within the Soviet Union and the Communist International, but with the small, embattled forces of the Left Opposition.

In October 1928, Cannon thought that his exile from American Communism's Main Street was not going to last long. Trotsky's documents opened his eyes; soon they would have a like effect on the revolutionary ranks of the American Party, and on countless others, both in the United States, and around the world. In a letter to an old comrade, Arne Swaback, but later published anonymously, Cannon put his trust in the "rank and file militants and the serious revolutionaries who have built the movement and stood loyally by it in its hardest days." Once they had learned "the facts" and come "to understand the disruptive consequences of this criminal act" of expelling principled Party members whose only transgression was to demand "honest study" of critically important issues, Cannon was certain "others will demand our reinstatement." If such voices of protest were to be stifled by further expulsions, "A Party uprising against this whole system will be one of the most fruitful results of our fight."

5 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 61, 74–75. On reports of Trotsky's illness see "Trotsky and Radek Seriously Ill," *The Militant*, 15 November 1928. So confident of the isolating impact of Trotsky's exile to Alma Alta were the Stalinist functionaries that one of them supposedly replied to a question about Trotsky's health in 1928 with the retort: "We have chased Trotsky so far into the outer darkness, that even if he were sick, nobody would hear of it." Quoted in Maurice Spector to Jim Cannon, 9 October 1928, Reel 6, Documents from Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Contemporary History, Microfilm Copies Held, Prometheus Research Library, New York, New York [hereafter Russian Center, PRL].

The outcome would be the “regeneration of the Party and the reconstitution of its leadership on a proletarian Communist basis.” Little did Cannon know, as he walked with Shachtman and Abern to the apartment he shared with Rose Karsner, what the future held. Relations with his former comrades would soon become truly ugly. The project of Bolshevik rejuvenation was even more of an uphill fight than Cannon, as hard-nosed as he imagined himself to be, could ever have anticipated.⁶

2 Stalinism Consolidating

The upper echelons of the international Communist movement, at the time of the Sixth World Congress in 1928, were not a trusting lot. A state political directorate, the secret police force known as the GPU (Gosundarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie), evolved, in Isaac Deutscher’s words, into something of the opposite of its beginnings in the years of war communism. From an original Cheka, staffed by insurgent revolutionaries dedicated to “the utopian Spartan equality” of the world’s first workers’ state and struggling to suppress “real and active enemies” of the nascent proletarian republic, the GPU by the 1930s had become a “machine of terror,” indiscriminate in its violence, anti-popular in its purposes, and a “guardian of inequality.” Dull-witted, bureaucratic functionaries like V. Molotov and idealistic, if narrow-thinking, fanatics like F. Dzerzhinsky adapted the GPU to Stalin’s 1923–28 consolidation of undisputed power. One of the first suggestions of the GPU’s degeneration was its suppression of a 1923 uprising of workers’ discontent in Moscow and Petrograd. It justified its expanding role in monitoring all political life inside the Soviet Union, calling on Party members to denounce anyone who posed criticisms of government officials. By 1926–27, the GPU had its sights firmly set on a growing Opposition led by Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Preobrazhensky.⁷

With Stalin publicly howling about a “united front from Chamberlain to Trotsky,” and the threat it posed to the revolutionary Soviet Union, the GPU

6 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 55; Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 225; Cannon, “Concerning our Expulsion: A Letter to a Comrade,” *The Militant*, 15 November 1928.

7 Within the American Workers (Communist) Party the fullest discussion of this Russian Opposition of 1926–27 appears in Bertram D. Wolfe, Director, National Agitprop Department, “Speakers’ Outline for Discussion on the Controversy in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union,” 16 page typescript; and Dear Comrades, 26 June 1927, Roll 2/Reel 3345, both in Max Shachtman Papers, Tamiment Institute, Bobst Library, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter MS Papers].

infiltrated the Opposition, raided its ostensible 'print shop', and fabricated a slanderous account of a counter-revolutionary conspiracy. Leading Oppositionists were expelled from the Party and, for the first time, a prominent ally of Trotsky's was imprisoned. Trotsky himself was accused of breaches of communist discipline, the charges paving the way for a move to expel him from the Executive of the Communist International. On 17 January 1928, the GPU seized Trotsky and his family, transported them forcibly to a Moscow train station, and dragged the former leader of the Red Army to a railway carriage. Trotsky's state-sanctioned kidnapping came to an end a week later, at 3AM, the last 250 kilometers of the journey conducted by bus, lorry, sleigh, and on foot through snow-drifts, ending in the miserable administrative Kazakhstan backwater, Alma Alta, that was to be the home of the leader of the Left Opposition for one year.⁸ And yet, this original suppression of Trotsky's political challenge neither silenced the dissident communist critique of Stalinism nor resorted to the full range of violence that would later be wielded in the name of preserving "socialism in one country." Just as Stalinism lurched programmatically from right to left and back again as circumstances dictated new paths of arbitrary and opportunistic policy,⁹ so too did it move uncertainly in its adoption of repressive violence. In the dance of Stalinist deceit that would unfold within the Workers (Communist) Party of America, the two-step would graduate from guile to gangsterism.

Trotsky, of course, was to become a great white whale that would prove an Ahab-like obsession for Stalin's GPU over the course of the 1930s. James P. Cannon was a much smaller fish. He managed to slip through some Soviet bureaucratic nets. Laying his hands on key Trotsky documents at the Sixth Congress, Cannon, in concert with the Canadian Party leader and precocious Comin-

8 On the GPU, Trotsky, and the Left Opposition, as discussed in the above two paragraphs, see, as an introduction only, Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed, 1921–1929* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 108–110, 357–359, with Alma Alta discussed 393–471; Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast, 1929–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 109–110, which contrasts the changing nature of the GPU under Stalinization. Also on Alma Alta see Leon Trotsky, *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 539–557. On Stalin's rise from a non-descript Bolshevik functionary to the leading figure of the bureaucratization of the Soviet Communist Party and the Communist International it eventually controlled see Leon Trotsky, *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence*, edited and translated by David North (London: Well Red Books, 2016); and Thomas M. Twiss, *Trotsky and the Problem of Soviet Bureaucracy* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015).

9 Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: Viking, 1960), 375: "The Stalinists were capable of outbidding the most extreme Leftists in one period and the most extreme Rightists in another."

tern Executive Committee member, Maurice Spector,¹⁰ smuggled the volatile material out of the Soviet Union. Cannon then used Trotsky's critical commentary on Comintern policy to recruit a small, but pivotal, core of allies inside the Workers (Communist) Party. Cannon and Spector tried to keep their Left Oppositionist inclinations in check at the Sixth Congress. They fooled few who really wanted to keep tabs on their emerging Trotskyist views. The GPU interrogated the younger, and almost certainly more rash Spector, and apparently put together a report on Cannon, a comrade whose surveillance by Stalin's secret police demanded certain circumspect procedures because he was well-known to be one of the three major factional leaders inside the important United States Party. Within the GPU there was little ambiguity about the political direction Cannon and Spector were taking. Precisely how to deal with a figure such as Cannon, suspected of moving toward Trotskyism, demanded a well-thought out plan. A certain delicacy was necessary, especially given Stalinism's penchant for intrigues that would always balance the American Party factionalism against itself, the better to cultivate a leadership ultimately reliant on and unambiguously subservient to the bureaucratic dictates of the Communist International.¹¹ All of this allowed Cannon and Spector a relatively uninhibited return to the United States and Canada. The intensification of the factional jockeying for position inside the American Party again bought Cannon more leeway than might otherwise have been the case. As various layers of incompletely assimilated American Stalinists turned what they thought was the roasting carcass of Cannon on spits of their own design, the first steps against the American Left Opposition were seemingly hesitant and halting.¹²

10 A brief biographical entry on Spector appears in an appendix in William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1919–1929* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), 169–170. Spector, 23 years of age at the time, was made Chairman of the Canadian Workers Party upon its formation in 1922; at a very young age he was elected to the ECCI. There is comment on Spector and the Sixth Congress in Stewart Smith, *Comrades and Komsomolkas: My Years in the Communist Party of Canada* (Toronto: Lugs, 1993), 109–111. For a fuller discussion of Cannon and Spector in this period see Bryan D. Palmer, "Maurice Spector, James P. Cannon, and the Origins of Canadian Trotskyism," *Labour/Le Travail*, 56 (Fall 2005), 91–148.

11 For Cannon's later understanding of this Comintern, Stalinist strategy see Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 201–209; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 50–51. Note as well Bertram D. Wolfe, *A Life in Two Centuries: An Autobiography* (New York: Stein and Day, 1981), 441.

12 For the standard older account see Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 357–376. I offer a fuller and at times slightly different account in Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 316–349; Palmer, "Maurice Spector, James P. Cannon, and the Origins of Canadian Trotskyism," 91–148.

Cannon returned to New York from the Moscow Sixth Congress on 23 September 1928.¹³ His ally, Maurice Spector, did a quick tour of Europe before settling back into the routine of Canadian Party activities in Toronto during the second week of October 1928. Spector used his European sojourn to scout out the disorganized and ineffective communist oppositional forces in Germany and France. In Germany, Spector found the Communist Party factionalized and rife with expulsions: "Anybody who dares discuss or criticize except in the official channels, is driven out." The young Canadian managed to establish relations with Hugo Urbahns, expelled from the Communist International for supporting the United Russia Opposition in 1927, and subsequently the founder and principal leader of the oppositional Leninbund. Urbahns was supposedly in the beginning stages of organizing an international conference. But Spector's forays into oppositional circles in Paris suggested that any coming together of dissident European communist forces would be difficult indeed: only one of a number of groups – Maurice Paz's *Contre le Courant* tendency – adhered, according to Spector, to the Opposition led by Trotsky. Accumulating a file of documents, Spector now had no doubts of the crisis unfolding in the Communist International.¹⁴

In clandestine discussions in Moscow, Cannon and Spector had wrestled with how to handle their conversion to Trotsky's Left Opposition inside the Sixth Congress sessions. They also gave considerable thought to what needed doing once they returned to their Party positions in the United States and Canada. Opting to keep their new programmatic criticisms to themselves in Moscow, they reasoned that this was the only way they could indeed resituate themselves effectively in North America. Cannon and Spector balked at committing themselves to the Congress factional struggle, obviously being waged against Bukharin and the Right Danger but also implicitly premised on fundamental and now long-standing animosity to Trotsky and his ideas. Even though many in the loose Cannon-Foster caucus at the Sixth Congress pressured Cannon to step into the breach in order to secure advantage over the dominant Lovestone forces and displace Foster, who was experiencing repudiation by his own allies, Cannon and Spector decided against this subterfuge.¹⁵

13 The date of Cannon's return is stated in Minutes, Special Meeting of the Political Committee of the CEC, 18 October 1928, Second Session, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL.

14 Palmer, "Spector, Cannon, and the Origins of Canadian Trotskyism," 121–122. I benefitted from seeing a file compiled by Ian McKay relating to his ongoing researches on Spector and, in particular, the sources he accumulated in his post-Sixth Congress travels in Europe.

15 On Foster's setbacks in this period see Edward P. Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994),

To be sure, such a course held out the possibility of elevating Cannon to a position of undisputed leadership. This could later be exploited in a decisive shift to Trotskyism. Such a slick move had a certain appeal to Party functionaries schooled in the factional finesse of the mid-to-late 1920s world Communist movement. “Since the death of Lenin,” Cannon later suggested, “the politics of the Comintern had become a school of maneuverism, and we ourselves had been affected by it.” Nonetheless, beginning to assimilate the lessons of Trotsky’s “Draft Program,” Cannon and Spector “came to the conclusion that the cause of Trotskyism would be served better in the long run if we frankly proclaimed his program and started the education of a new cadre on that basis, even though it was certain to mean our own expulsion and virtual isolation at the start of the new fight.” As Spector toured Europe and made contact with oppositional forces and continued to monitor the crisis of the Communist International, he was further convinced of the sagacity of what had obviously been Cannon’s suggestion of a strategic orientation. In his first substantial communication with Cannon upon his return to Canada, Spector wrote, “Your decision to come out with the fundamental program is, I believe, correct. I thought the matter over carefully in Europe and I cannot see any reality in a fight on a limited program.” In any case, the fight was now being taken to Cannon and Spector. The word was out that “Lovestone is starting a reign of ideological terror in the Party, and that no opposition will be tolerated.”¹⁶

3 Stalinist Slow Dancing: Guile

Before the terror came the tip-toeing. The Secretariat of the Executive Committee of the Communist International [ECCI] informed the Central Committee of the Workers (Communist) Party of America, late in September 1928, that it was the “unconditional obligation” of all Party members to “abstain from any fractional actions,” concentrating instead on the “election campaign and also on other important militant tasks.” Longstanding antagonism separating the

242–245; James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 158–162; Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 321–322. Cannon addresses what he refers to as Foster’s defeat and isolation within his own group in Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 213–215.

16 Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 211–212; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 50–51; Maurice Spector to Jim Cannon, 9 October 1928, Reel 6, Russian Centre, PRL.

Lovestone Majority and its supposed “Right line” and the Minority represented by the joint Cannon-Foster forces was to be put aside until the calling of a Party Congress.¹⁷ Yet the first Political Committee meeting that Cannon attended on his return to New York, held on 1 October 1928, was business as usual, with the factional line-up largely predictable.

Cannon caucused with two Foster supporters, Philip Aronberg and H.I. Costrell, and managed, in the absence of Foster and Bittleman, to secure their agreement to buck the Comintern’s heavy-handed insistence that all factional hatchets be buried. The three dissidents attempted to register their disagreement with the Sixth Congress decision that the Lovestone Majority did not represent a rightist alignment within the American Party. Cannon thus sealed a commitment, albeit one that would be short-term, on the part of Foster’s lieutenants to the premises of the joint Cannon-Foster submission to the Sixth Congress, “The Right Danger in the American Party,” an indictment of the Lovestone leadership and policies that overestimated the reserves and staying power of American capitalism.¹⁸

Cannon proceeded cautiously, even coyly, but he did so by demanding an end to Lovestone’s factional suppression of what one motion referred to as “the opposition.” Cannon, Aronberg, and Constrell were almost always outvoted, but the stage was set for Lovestone to hoist his only serious challenger for the Party leadership, William Z. Foster, on the anti-Trotskyist petard. Lovestone, tutored by Bukharin at the end of the Sixth Congress, was shown a report on Cannon compiled by the GPU. It referenced conversations with Spector, Bill Dunne, Clarence Hathaway, and others, suggesting that the Kansas revolutionary, while certainly circumspect, had contrasted the work of the Congress unfavorably with earlier ECCI gatherings “under the leadership of Lenin, Trotsky, Radek, Zinoviev, etc.” This, in conjunction with Cannon’s “great interest in Trotsky documents” and persistent “questions relating to the reinstatement of Trotsky in the Comintern and in the Russian party,” had been more than enough to alert Stalin’s agents keen to sniff out any possible recruits to the Left Opposition. Lovestone hardly needed to be pointed in the direction of factional possib-

17 Secretariat of the ECCI to the Central Committee of the Workers (Communist) Party of America, 8 September 1928; and Attachment to Political Committee Minutes, 26 September 1928, Par. 49, from the General Political Thesis, Adopted by Sixth World Congress, both in Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL.

18 This was not unrelated to the development of the Jay Lovestone-Bertram D. Wolfe perspective on ‘American Exceptionalism’. For a discussion of this, and citation of relevant sources, see Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 307–309, and for a Cannon, Costrell, Aronberg statement, *Daily Worker*, 2 October 1928.

ility, but Bukharin wasted no time in stating the obvious: “Cannon’s conversion to Trotskyism” provided “an opportunity to smash the Foster Opposition.”¹⁹

In the factional hothouse of the Workers (Communist) Party, what would soon crystallize as a Stalinist bureaucratic method was pioneered within the Lovestone group by Comintern emissary Jozsef Pogány/John Pepper [Swift]. This happened before the program of “socialism in one country” had consolidated decisively.²⁰ The ferreting out of Cannon and his Left Opposition ideas and allies would, for a pivotal few weeks, unfold in tandem with the complicated Lovestone-Foster contest over who would hold the leadership reins of the American Party. Both individuals actually thought that power could be won internally, as opposed to it being ordered into being from afar. They would soon find out, painfully so, how wrong they were in their illusions, the price paid for being premature, incomplete Stalinists.²¹

Foster’s demand to oust the Left Oppositionists would surface first, and seemingly most ferociously. But it took some time for him to differentiate himself decisively from Trotsky and his American advocates. Foster would later denounce Cannon viciously, referring to “the back-stabbing treachery” of the “self-seeking adventurer” who, “defeated in his own faction, demoralized by the Coolidge ‘prosperity’ period, and overwhelmed by the current

19 “The Right Danger in the American Party” would be published in serialized form in *The Militant*, 15 November 1928; 1 December 1928; 15 December 1928; 1 January 1929; 15 January 1929. For Cannon’s brief bloc with Aronberg and Constrell see Minutes, Political Committee, 1 October 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL. On Bukharin, Lovestone, and the surveillance of Cannon at the Sixth Congress see Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess: The Truth About American Communism* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1940), 508; and for what I suspect constituted a Lovestone Group summary of the GPU report on Cannon, “Points of Information on the Cannon Question: In Moscow,” section of “Additional Information Concerning Trytskyist [sic] Tendencies in the American (USA) Party,” No date (13 November 1928), Confidential, submitted by J. Louis Engdahl for the Information of the ECCI, Reel 9, Russian Center, PRL. See, as well, Charles Shipman [Manuel Gomez], *It Had to be Revolution: Memoirs of an American Radical* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 172–174.

20 On Pepper see, for his international history, Thomas Sakmyster, “A Hungarian in the Comintern: Jozsef Pogány/John Pepper,” in Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, eds., *Agents of the Revolution: New Biographical Approaches to the History of International Communism in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 57–72; and for his influence in the United States, Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*. Trotsky would comment that when in the United States Pepper “dragged the young Communist Party into the swamp up to its waist.” He of course became “a prophet of socialism in one country and one of the most ferocious anti-Trotskyists. Now he has made this his profession, as others run a matrimonial agency or sell lottery tickets.” L.D. Trotsky, “Who Is Leading the Comintern To-day?” *The Militant*, 15 August 1929.

21 See, for instance, Wolfe, *A Life in Two Centuries*, 494; Gitlow, *I Confess*, 528.

difficulties in building socialism in the USSR, joined forces with the wordy, counter-revolutionary Trotsky.”²² Yet the aptly named Zig-Zag Foster did not hold to this derogatory assessment at the Sixth Congress. Humiliated during the course of 1928, Foster suffered stern rebuke from his key Comintern ally, Solomon Lozovsky. At issue was his mechanical opposition to dual unionism, first assailed at the Red International of Labor Unions Fourth Congress early in the year. Then, in a related dust-up at the World Congress, Foster lost control over his own faction. Former Foster loyalists, Alexander Bittelman, Earl Browder, and Jack W. Johnstone turned on their factional head and, as Cannon later reported, “gave the impression ... of people who had broken out of long confinement and were running wild.”²³ Foster’s animosity to Lovestone kept him aligned with his own faction and what remained of the Cannon group. This Minority opposition to the Central Executive Committee Majority refused to bow to Bukharin’s closing Sixth Congress theses which, in the view of William F. Dunne, Alexander Bittelman, and Foster, failed to “condemn the Majority of the Central Committee for its stubborn attempt to exempt our Party from the general line of Comintern policy” and “clearly repudiate the Right Wing line of the majority leadership which has systematically magnified difficulties and minimized the possibilities of struggle.”²⁴

Unsure of his stature within his own divided faction, and uncertain of who his true allies in the future might be, Foster made a subtle overture to Dunne and Cannon before leaving Moscow. He intimated that he might welcome putting their mutual relations on a better footing. When Foster returned to the United States from Moscow in September 1928, and embarked on his campaign as the Workers (Communist) Party’s Presidential candidate, he was embittered and beaten down, given to fuming against the schemers in the Lovestone leadership. Draper described Foster as wandering “away from the main body of his

22 William Z. Foster, “James P. Cannon: Renegade,” Unpublished manuscript first written for inclusion in *Pages from a Worker’s Life*, courtesy of James R. Barrett.

23 Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 321–322; Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism*, 158–160; Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 306–314; Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 213; Wolfe, *A Life in Two Centuries*, 459.

24 William Z. Foster, Alexander Bittelman, and Bill Dunne, Handwritten, untitled proposal for appointment of American Commission, prefacing undated “Statement of Minority on Theses,” Moscow (August/September 1928?), Reel 9, Russian Center, PRL. Foster’s position is perhaps most extensively developed in Comrade Foster Statement, July 1928, Congress of ECCI, Moscow, Box 11, Folder 12, Martin Abern Papers, John Dwyer Collection, Wayne State Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.

troops into a strange no man's land between the warring camps." Arne Swabeck claimed that immediately upon his return from the Sixth Congress, Foster was actually making noises within his circle that Trotsky's critique of Comintern policy was masterful, but that no one in the caucus wanted to hear this. Bittelman did his best to nip any Foster deviations in the bud. As aware as anyone of the anti-Trotskyist tide that had been growing within the Comintern, now officially poised to assail the Right Danger within all affiliated parties, Bittelman also knew of Cannon's germinating discontents with Stalin's leadership. Many was the time, sitting in a restaurant just off Second Avenue, or attending a social evening at Bill Dunne's apartment, the booze flowing and glasses clanking, that Bittelman had heard Cannon offer his earthy aphorism, "Stalin makes shit out of leaders and leaders out of shit." As one of the more consciously evolving Stalinists in the American communist milieu, Bittelman grasped intuitively in early October 1928 that Foster needed to lead the anti-Trotskyist charge against Cannon. "Otherwise," he pressured Foster, "our name in Moscow will be mud."²⁵

With Foster preoccupied with the Presidential campaign and Bittelman still in Moscow, the Fosterities seemed somewhat out to sea until the Lenin School graduate and former Cannon ally, Clarence Hathaway, arrived from Moscow on 3 October 1928. Hathaway had been recommended for the Moscow perk of attending the Lenin School by Cannon. Nonetheless, over the course of his Sixth Congress discussions with Hathaway Cannon came to appreciate that his old friend was now little more than a "police-minded" functionary. "[T]rained to scent the wind in the Russian Party," he was "like all other students" of the misnamed Lenin School, "a fully indoctrinated Stalinist." Hathaway picked up on enough of Cannon's vacillations, and was sufficiently well-instructed on how to mechanically manipulate meetings and word resolutions so as to back suspected "Trotskyites" into particular corners, that his appearance in New York signaled a new and obviously more precarious phase in Cannon's relations with the Foster caucus. It was upon Hathaway's return to the United States that a concerted effort to flush Cannon out was undertaken.²⁶

25 Gitlow, *I Confess*, 504; Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 215; Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 377; Arne Swabeck, Unpublished, unpaginated autobiography, Autobiographies File, Prometheus Research Library, New York, New York, Chapter 12; Alexander Bittelman, "Things I Have Learned: An Autobiography," 510–511, Collection 62, Boxes 1–2, Tamiment Institute, Bobst Library, New York University, New York, New York; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 158–159.

26 Minutes, Special Meeting of the Political Committee of the CEC, 18 October 1928, Gorman Statement, 27, Second Session, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL, notes that Hathaway lectured the Foster caucus on the history of Trotskyism from 1903–28. Cannon discusses Hathaway's procedures and political character in *History of American Trotskyism*, 53; *First*

Much was made of Cannon's supposed claim that the Communist International under Bukharin's leadership was adopting a right-wing position and had to be opposed, that the American Minority must adopt an international orientation. Cannon refused to answer definitively as to what his position on "the Trotsky question" actually was, although it was bandied about that he had ostensibly stating caustically: "SOCIALISM IN ONE COUNTRY WAS A JOKE."²⁷ Called on the red carpet of their joint caucus with Foster's followers, and confronted with resolutions assailing Trotskyism as counter-revolutionary and incompatible with membership in the Workers (Communist) Party, Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern prevaricated and dodged as best they could, but the conclusion was obviously reached that it was high time to cut Cannon loose. With Foster and Bittelman now in New York, able to attend Political Committee meetings of the Central Executive Committee, and the schooled Stalinist, Clarence Hathaway, setting the stage, charges were laid against Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman. A motion proposed by Aronberg, Bittelman, and Foster stipulated that the three comrades who had been engaged in "the building up of a Trotskyist faction in the Party" were to be removed from their Party positions in the International Labor Defense and warned that if they continued they would be dismissed from the Party's Political Committee. Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman were also instructed to appear before the next Political Committee meeting to explain themselves. Pouncing on this motion, Lovestone's ally, John Pepper, immediately demanded to know how Foster, Bittelman, and Aronberg managed to come by the information that Cannon was "following a Trotskyist line ... What evidence is in the possession of the comrades to prove these charges?" Pepper, of course, was less interested in questions of proof than

Ten Years of American Communism, 207. Cannon's increasingly low opinion of Hathaway and his Lenin School "education" is evident in Cannon to Glotzer, 9 July 1929, Box 3, Folder 2, James P. Cannon Papers, Archives, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, MD 92-175, Madison, Wisconsin [hereafter JPC Papers]; Cannon to Glotzer, 16 November 1928, reprinted in Fred Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928-31 - The Left Opposition in the U.S. 1928-31* (New York: Monad Press, 1981), 49; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 53-54. Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 370 notes that Hathaway was sent to the Lenin School "on Cannon's recommendation." For more on Hathaway see Joseph Freeman, *An American Testament: A Narrative of Rebels and Romantics* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1938), 520-526; Albert Glotzer, *Trotsky: Memoir & Critique* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), 22-23; Smith, *Comrades and Komsomolks*, 97, 106-107.

27 When Lovestone later asked Cannon, "When did you first learn that the building of socialism in one country was a joke?" Cannon replied: "I never said that. I don't consider the fundamental principle questions as jokes and it is slanderous. I have stated in the Congress and I have stated to you that it is a wrong theory and that is the only thing I said." Political Committee Minutes, 27 October 1928, 13, MS Papers.

he was in utilizing the anti-Trotskyist proceedings to kill two birds with one stone: the Foster group, although it had no more information than Lovestone on Cannon's Trotskyist sympathies, could be condemned as having "borne in their loins a Trotskyist group," nursed it "in their bosom." With Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern clearly about to be expelled, it was thus in the interests of the Lovestone leadership to drag out the proceedings as long as possible in order to effectively tar Foster with the brush of Cannon, who had been something of a former caucus ally. Lovestone spoke of the importance of "thorough investigation" and cautioned that there was no need for immediate decisions or actions. Both Foster and Lovestone, moreover, adapted to the Comintern labeling of ideological dangers, condemning Trotskyism, traditionally designated a "left deviation," as but a *de facto* component of a right-leaning politics.²⁸

In the lengthy Political Committee meetings that followed, Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman faced a series of accusers. In the back and forth of questions and answers it was apparent that if the inquisition of the three Left Oppositionists was seemingly the main attraction, a subplot pitting the Foster and Lovestone forces against one another threatened to displace the headline event. Manuel Gomez (Charles Shipman) blurted out, when pressed by Cannon, that Foster supporters knew that, "If we do not bring this before the Party at once, before we have all the evidence, then Lovestone will beat us to it"²⁹ There was particular interest in linking Foster with Cannon, Lovestone supporter William Weinstone asking directly: "May I ask whether you anticipated or discussed

28 Minutes, Special Meeting of the Political Committee of the CEC, 16 October 1928; 18 October 1928, First Session (especially Hathaway Statement, 1–8, Gomez Statement, esp. 23), Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 158–159; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 53–54. For a clear statement of how some in the Foster group recoiled from the notion that they had harbored Cannon and Trotskyism see T. Radwanski to the Polbureau of the CEC, 21 November 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL. For the Foster group's position that Trotskyism "cloaks itself in left phrases and results in opportunism and social democracy," that Cannon's promotion of the Right Danger view of the Lovestone leadership was nothing more than "hypocrisy" constituting "a maneuver to make inroads into the real left wing elements of our Party," and that the Lovestone Right Wing Majority had to be replaced by a new leadership following correct policies see "Proof That Opposition Maintains Party within Party," 20 November 1928, Reel 9, Russian Center, PRL. The most developed Foster Caucus statement is "For a Correct Bolshevik Line in the American Party Against the Right Danger and Against the Cannon Trotsky Opposition: Statement by the Minority of the Central Executive Committee of the Workers Communist Party of America," no date (16 October 1928), Reel 6, Russian Center, PRL. For a discussion of Lovestone assimilating Trotskyism to the Right Danger see Howe and Coser, *American Communist Party*, 167.

29 Minutes, Special Meeting of the Political Committee of the CEC, 18 October 1928, First Session, Gomez Statement, 22, 27, Russian Center, PRL.

with Comrade Foster the formation of a new group which would embrace a section of the former opposition." Cannon replied, "I personally would not relate any private conversations except insofar as necessary to refute false allegations, but I state again that there was no such proposal made by Foster to me or by me to him." At times, the proceedings veered into the realm of the absurd, with Party members suggesting that the mere studying of a subject, such as the Chinese Revolution, was grounds for suspicion because it was "one of the questions in which the CI had difficulties with Trotsky." Amidst such prejudice, ignorance, and misrepresentation, Cannon managed to slip in some prophetic counters: "I don't say that Trotsky always fought correctly. I said he always fought on the side of the Soviet Union, and always will. He will be fighting there when some of those who are now shouting will be fighting on the other side of the barricade."³⁰

The hearings wore on. Lovestone reveled in facilitating Cannon's interrogation of those Fosterites who were denouncing his incipient Trotskyism, clearly enjoying it as his opposing forces squirmed. Shachtman remembered it as all rather free and easy, with Lovestone insisting on certain democratic niceties that protected Cannon and his two supporters. After hours of testimony on 18 October 1928, spanning two lengthy day and evening sessions that generated scores of stenographer transcript pages, the exchanges grew heated. Bittelman protested that the Political Committee had passed the procedural reins of the investigation over to Cannon, who was being accommodated in his request to question all of those who were making allegations about his supposed Trotskyist sympathies. When Lovestone confirmed Cannon's right to question witnesses within certain parameters, Bittelman charged his adversary with "surrendering the initiative of the Polcom in exposing the Trotsky maneuver of Comrade Cannon in the American Party." Lovestone countered with feigned concern for the rights of the accused: "We are handling here a question which involves the very life of certain comrades in the Communist movement and therefore the life of comrades in the working-class movement. ... The only comrades being investigated are the three comrades mentioned and to insure an investigation which will be not only fool-proof but also demagogue-proof, the comrades shall be granted ... a right to ask questions. ... The fact that Comrade Cannon is under charges is all the more reason of his having the right to question, plus his right as a member of the Politburo involved." Sam Don, a Young Workers (Communist) League leader, and former Cannon supporter,

³⁰ Minutes, Special Meeting of the Political Committee of the CEC, 18 October 1928, Second Session, Cannon Statement, 26, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; Political Committee Minutes, 27 October 1928, 10, 25, MS Papers.

was then threatened with physical removal from the proceedings and a Control Commission investigation of his behavior when he challenged and interrupted Lovestone, heckling him from the sidelines that he was guilty of “tolerance towards Trotskyism.” This was too much. Lovestone insisted that, “Mr. Trotsky and Mr. Sam Don have shown the same spirit in trying to separate the Party from the Polcom, and his action tonight is an anti-Party action which is an essential feature of Trotskyism.” Bittelman and Aronberg tried to come to Don’s defense, but to no avail. The meeting broke up in a flurry of motions. One saw Cannon plead for an official Party inquiry into a Keystone Agency detective being sent to International Labor Defense headquarters to act as a “bodyguard” during the removal of Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman from their Party offices. Another warned all comrades present that none of what they heard in the hearings was to be made public.³¹

The marathon 18 October 1928 Political Committee hearings drew upwards of 100 comrades to a crowded and increasingly unruly hall. When, more than a week later, the proceedings reconvened on 27 October 1928, the verbal jousting became anti-climactic. With Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman tabling their Russian Opposition declaration, everyone knew that the outcome of this final meeting would be the expulsion of the advocates of the Left Opposition. Foster declared with impatient indignation: “It is absolutely clear already that there is a Trotskyite faction in the party and that the three leaders of it are sitting right here.” This final hearing saw Lovestone, Jack Stachel, and others go on the offensive, pressuring Cannon to name those with whom he was in collaboration, both inside the Soviet Union and within the United States. Laughter punctuated Cannon’s exchange with Bittelman:

Bittelman: You stated in reply to a question asked of you that in your last visit to the Soviet Union you were in contact with leaders of the Russian Opposition. Could you name some of them?

Cannon: I don’t recall the names.

Bittelman: Do you know the name of anyone, a single one?

Cannon: I don’t have a good memory for names. ... When you want information of this kind you are asking the wrong section of the former opposition.

31 Minutes, Special Meeting of the Political Committee of the CEC, 18 October 1928, Second Session, esp. 38–41, Russian Center, PRL; “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 161–168; Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 222; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 54, 240; Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 338–340.

Cannon denied any contact with the German Oppositionist Urbahns. He deliberately misrepresented the extent to which he had discussed Trotsky's ideas and the necessity of building a Left Opposition in the United States and Canada with Maurice Spector, and refused to acknowledge that he had been in touch with Max Eastman, but for the most part Cannon stood his ground honestly. He defended the need to study questions raised by Trotsky, and insisted that the Russian Opposition provided a perspective congruent with his long history as a revolutionist:

Minor: How far back in point of Party history do you see a consistent line in your position and struggles in the Party leading to your present position?

Cannon: In general, my whole record.

Minor: You consider that it extends back to the struggles which began in the Polcom of the Party in 1923?

Cannon: Before that. Back to the time when we formed the Party. Back to years and years of revolutionary record before that.

When Stachel commented, "you are a member of the Polcom and have been for a long time as I remember," Cannon quipped, "Longer than you remember." Cannon was increasingly using the hearings to castigate those who had turned on him. When Pepper asked why former associates like Hathaway and Gomez had "come out against you so sharply and clear," Cannon merely wrote them off as, "tenth-rate people who want to be on the strong side and want to be very energetic in defending the victorious side."³²

Lovestone could reap little more from what was now a charade. He moved that "every prominent member of that section of the opposition hitherto known as the Cannon group" be contacted in writing by the Political Bureau of the Party "asking each one specifically for a statement on the document submitted to us by Comrades Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman." He singled out specific comrades, like Arne Swabeck, and insisted that Boston's Antoinette Konikow be summoned to appear before the Political Committee and be subjected to investigation. Finally, he moved that "the signers of the document presented to us today are immediately expelled from the Party."³³

32 Political Committee Minutes, 27 October 1928, esp. 13, 17–20, 24, MS Papers; Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 223.

33 Political Committee Minutes, 27 October 1928, Roll 2/R3345, esp. 16, MS Papers. There is a useful abridgement of some of Cannon's statements before this final 27 October 1928 interrogation in *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, 526–533.

The October interrogations had seen both Foster and Lovestone, and their factional allies, adapt to Stalinism's dictates. Both were now stuck with Stalinism even as they clung to the belief that they could outwit it, securing their decisive advantage inside the Party of American communism. Cannon's project was of an entirely different kind: to defeat Stalinism, internationally and nationally, returning Bolshevism to its origins. His Trotskyism was ostensibly the *raison d'être* of the Workers (Communist) Party October Inquisition, but in actuality the Lovestone-orchestrated, Foster-pressed affair had seen as much shadow boxing among the Stalinist combatants as any serious investigation of the substantive ideas of the Left Opposition. In the end, the Cannon, Abern, Shachtman declaration in favor of the Russian Opposition undoubtedly came as something of shock to both the Lovestone and Foster camps. Their entire political beings, for all of their differences, were so overdetermined by the Stalinist commitment to wielding power bureaucratically that they simply could not fathom the basic principle that now guided Cannon and his supporters. The notion that issues of political program should be studied and discussed openly, that the Communist International and its leadership could be criticized for its actual policies and practices, and that the task of a principled Left Opposition was to struggle to win the entire apparatus of World Revolution away from its misguided orientation, struck both the Lovestone and Foster camps like a manifesto from another galaxy. So compromised had the possibility of discussing political principles become within a Stalinized Comintern that it was impossible to have a reasoned debate over questions raised by Trotsky and the Left Opposition. Virtually no one within the Workers (Communist) Party understood what was happening, including hundreds of rank-and-file comrades whose working relations with Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman had always been cordial and confiding. Among those who thoroughly distrusted Cannon and who dug in their leadership heels against even hearing about the issues involved, the belief undoubtedly was, as stated clearly by former Cannonist and *nouveau arriviste* Fosterite, Manuel Gomez, that the Left Opposition within the United States was "so infinitesimal in strength and support" as to merit little consideration. "You and the Trotsky tendencies in our Party," Gomez said in response to Cannon, "represent vestiges which cannot and will not be the main danger to the Party."³⁴

Playing for time during the first three-and-a-half weeks of October 1928, Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman confessed nothing and gave the Lovestone-Foster

34 Minutes, Special Meeting of the Political Committee of the CEC, First Session, 18 October 1928, 23, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL.

forces the impression that they might well “come to [their] senses and not just go and start a futile fight for Trotsky at this late date.” Lulled into thinking that they so held the upper hand, and that little of any danger was in the offing, the divided anti-Trotskyist leadership then sat “hushed and somewhat terrified” when Cannon read the prepared statement “For the Russian Opposition!” into the Party record. Cannon later explained to Spector that, “Our bold step was a big surprise to the Polcom. They were not prepared for it and do not even now dream of the next step we will take along the same line. They were expecting to meet an inside caucus game.” The incredulity of the Lovestone and Foster groups at Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman actually declaring, on 27 October 1928, their commitment to struggle for the program of Trotsky and the Left Opposition, was then matched with shock that these “Three Generals With No Army” were prepared to build on the shot they fired across the bow of the Political Committee.

One day after reading their “For the Russian Opposition!” Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman were circulating a letter throughout the Party, urging comrades to write to them at Cannon’s home address. They promised to “bring the documents of the Russian Opposition, a treasure of revolutionary work, to the Party members as rapidly as possible.” Mimeographed “Bulletins” were soon informing Workers (Communist) Party members of expulsions, the plans of the Left Opposition, and where inquiries and financial support could be sent. Most impressively, less than three weeks after the Cannon, Abern, Shachtman expulsion, *The Militant*, an eight-page “Semi-Monthly Organ of the Opposition Group in the Workers (Communist) Party of America,” was being flogged outside of Party headquarters, its pages headlined, “For the Russian Opposition!” and “The Party ‘Discussion’ Opens!” The dreaded, Trotsky-authored “Draft Program of the Comintern: A Criticism of Fundamentals” was serialized in its first issues.

All of this caught the leadership and the communist rank-and-file off-guard; they were at first “taken by surprise.” The climate of indecision in the upper echelons of the Party was exacerbated by the need to concentrate energies on the November Presidential election campaign, which kept Foster as the Party’s candidate busy and stopped Lovestone from making the expulsions of Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman a major issue until after *The Militant* first appeared in mid-month. For a brief few weeks, the expelled Trotskyists had a relatively free hand in dispensing their modest body of documents, selling the press, and talking to rank-and-file comrades. Many of these communists were puzzled and open to discussing the issues at hand. Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman became fixtures outside of Party offices and in areas where communist handbills and newspapers were known to be distributed.³⁵

35 See Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 53–55, 66; Cannon to Spector, 5 November

This window of opportunity for political proselytizing would not stay open for long. As Cannon later wrote: “For a few weeks [the leadership] did not know what to do about [us]. Then they decided to try the Stalin method of physical force.”³⁶ The first step of guile in the Stalinist dance had run its course, and both Lovestone and Foster were quick to grasp that it had not necessarily produced the best results. Violence and the vitriol of gangsterism might better silence the hated Trotskyists.

4 Picking up the Pace: Gangsterism

The appearance of the first issue of *The Militant*, hawked for a nickel, “created a tremendous sensation.” It almost certainly prodded evolving American Stalinism in the direction of gangsterism. The guile of October meetings, in which Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman were addressed as ‘Comrade’ and afforded certain procedural formalities, now vanished. Lovestoneite henchmen took the lead in inciting the initial acts of violence. Bertram D. Wolfe championed physical attacks on the Left Opposition at a Workers Forum on 25 November 1928, and three days later another Lovestone faction figurehead, addressing the Italian section of the Party, claimed that the emerging Cannon-led Opposition was “worse than Mussolini and his fascists,” urging that they be beaten both “politically and physically.” Noting the announcement of the Wolfe forum, entitled “American Varieties of Trotskyism,” Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman immediately put out a leaflet challenging the Workers (Communist) Party to transform the lecture into a debate, so that both sides of the “Trotsky question” could be put forward. “Notice of acceptance received at any time up to the hour of the meeting will be time enough for us,” the three expelled communists declared but, needless to say, they were not invited to the Sunday evening Union Square meeting. Shachtman wrote to Albert Glotzer in Chicago that in New York many sympathetic comrades “more or less convinced of the

1928, Reel 6, Russian Center, PRL; “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 175; Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 371; Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman, “To the Party Members,” 28 October 1928, MS Papers, reprinted in *The Militant*, 15 November 1928; “Bulletin,” 16 November 1928; “Bulletin No. 2,” 21 November 1928, Box 11, File 31, Martin Abern Papers, in John Dwyer Collection, Wayne State Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter Abern Papers]. As an example of a comrade not disposed to accept Cannon’s arguments about the necessity of a Left Opposition, but willing to discuss the issues with him see Anna Porter to Cannon [Hamburg, no date, October – November 1928], Reel 2d, Russian Center, PRL.

36 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 66.

correctness of our position, ... are so terrorized and demagogued by the official decrees that they are ready to forego their principles ... rather than suffer the purely temporary and formal loss of their membership card." Party officials advised the rank-and-file to have no contact whatever with the Oppositionists, who deserved nothing better than to be "spit upon." Organized goon squads were instructed to "prevent the sale of *The Militant* at all costs and beat up the Oppositionists." In Shachtman's recollections, he, Cannon, and Abern were physically assaulted when they appeared to distribute their newspaper in the vicinity of Workers (Communist) Party headquarters. Toughs armed with clubs and knives assailed them. Refusing to back down, the dissidents "mobilized all our forces to go there Saturday afternoons, forming a guard around the editors and defying the Stalinist hoodlums to drive us away. One fight after another took place." Two Hungarian women, Maria Reinl and Pauline Gutringer, were selling *The Militant* outside of the Workers' Centre at Union Square on 10 December 1928 when they were manhandled by a mob that supposedly grew to "several hundred." Obscenities hurled in their face, denigrated as "counter-revolutionary prostitutes," the women stood their ground for a time, struggling to retrieve the precious *Militants* torn angrily from their hands. One found herself on the receiving end of a fist-blow to the face, and the pair began a cautious retreat towards 15th Street. The police eventually approached and escorted the women away, recognizing, perhaps, what Benjamin Gitlow claimed was a Communist insistence that the streets of certain New York neighborhoods "belonged to them." In late December 1928, Cannon wrote to Maurice Spector that, "We're still having battles against the gangster tactics. Last Saturday in front of the Center it came to quite a showdown, but they had to retreat completely."³⁷

This organized campaign of intimidation shocked Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman. It was now their turn to be surprised. The evolving language of

37 Max Shachtman, "25 Years of American Trotskyism: Part 1: The Origins of American Trotskyism," *New International*, 20 (January – February 1954), 11–12; Howe and Coser, *American Communist Party*, 167–168; Leaflets "Workers School Forum, Sunday Nights at 8 PM," and "A Challenge to Debate the Russian Opposition," Box 11, File 40, Abern Papers; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 66–67; "Gangsterism!," and John Menella, "You are Worse Than Fascists," *The Militant*, 15 December 1928; Pauline Gutringer, "The Affair on Union Square," and John Justin, "A Reaction to Gangsterism," *The Militant*, 1 January 1929; Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 40; Benjamin Gitlow, *The Whole of Their Lives: Communism in America – A Personal History and Intimate Portrayal of its Leaders* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1948), 233; Shachtman to Glotzer, 24 November 1928, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Cannon to Spector, 20 December 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL. *Militant* sellers in other cities might also be set upon. See "Gangsterism in Philadelphia," *The Militant*, 15 April 1929.

anti-Trotskyism was nothing less than a linguistics of invective, a prod to physical attack. Bertram D. Wolfe opened the fusillade in the pages of the *Daily Worker*, attacking Cannon and his comrades as “enemies of the working class,” part of an “internal union of renegades” who had joined “the camp of the plotters of war on the Soviet Union,” aligned with “imperialism, the social democracy, and the counter-revolution.” A Philadelphia comrade wrote to Cannon in January 1929, deploring the “ear-splitting ... vitriolic vituperation which brand you as “renegades” – “sinister plotters” – “party splitters” – “capitalist agents” – “counter revolutionists” – “degenerates” – “adventurers” – “buzzards” – “cowards” – “social democrats” and other choice epithets.” Gitlow noted that Party leaders “swore that they would treat the Trotskyites like rats and traitors.” Shachtman was aghast:

We looked almost in utter disbelief at what we were seeing and what we were witnessing and what we were participating in. Comrades with whom we had lived and fought both as opponents and colleagues in factional fights for years and years, who had been comrades of ours in every sense of the word – not just politically but personally, were threatening to beat us up or cut us up, just for doing nothing more than selling our Militant.

This, Shachtman insisted, was unprecedented in the record of the revolutionary left: “For the first time in the history of any radical or socialist movement, we saw not only an expulsion which resulted in the formation of another movement but also an attempt made by the older organization to smash the new group in the egg by the open, direct, conscious and organized use of force and violence.” The struggling embryo of a Trotskyist movement thus “raised a big hullabaloo.” Stalinist slander and thuggery, commonplace throughout Manhattan where the early violence was concentrated, scandalized progressive elements. The American Civil Liberties Union, often an advocate of the rights of free speech for communists, wrote to Lovestone in an effort to stop the thuggery and embarrass the leadership of the Workers (Communist) Party. Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern attended the 17 December 1928 Plenary Session of the Central Executive Committee, Cannon granted Party permission to appeal the expulsion of the three Left Oppositionists. He spoke for one hour, addressing three separate sixty-minute reports directed against those expelled and justifying the action, the Lovestone Reporter being none other than John Pepper. The 200 present tolerated Cannon’s presence, but were in no mood to listen. As Cannon later told Arne Swabeck, “a lynching atmosphere [had been] carefully worked up.” A significant section of Cannon’s talk, which addressed critical questions of Party policy and practice and the importance and necessity of

being able to discuss the positions of the Russian Opposition, condemned the physical assaults directed against those who had taken up Trotsky's ideas. Cannon railed against, "This deplorable gangsterism, for which the leaders of the two factions collaborating against us, the Lovestone faction and the Foster faction, are directly responsible." Violence of this kind, Cannon declared unequivocally, was "hated by every honest worker." Likening the thuggery unleashed by Party leaders to the "methods of the trade union reactionaries," Cannon insisted that, in conjunction with the bureaucratic suppression of discussion and debate of principled questions of concern to all communists, the new climate of coercion engulfing the Party could only end with "the disruption of the movement."³⁸

His protests duly noted, Cannon and his two fellow Left Oppositionists were "ushered out." They had no illusions, and their expulsion was, of course, upheld. Far from the fray there were Cannon supporters who, perhaps in their disbelief of the lengths that emerging Stalinism was willing to go, seemed rather dismissive of the New York reports of orchestrated gangsterism. A Detroit auto worker and proud Oppositionist, Barney Mass, wrote Cannon to suggest that "talk of gangsterism" be moderated. "It may make those poltroons believe they have nerve," Mass noted, suggesting instead that a better approach would be to treat the whole matter "satirically," since this was "likely to have a better effect." He assured Cannon that he and others in the Motor City would welcome all comers on their turf: "There is no danger for them to out militantize the Militants here."³⁹ The violence, however, was to get much worse before it would

38 Wolfe, "Three Generals with No Army," *Daily Worker*, 27 November 1928; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 176; Shachtman, "25 Years of American Trotskyism," 11; Max Shachtman, "Radicalism in the Thirties: The Trotskyist View," in Rita James Simon, ed., *As We Saw The Thirties: Essays on Social and Political Movements of a Decade* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 17; Forrest Bailey, Director, ACLU, to James P. Cannon, 2 March 1929, Box 3, File 1, JPC Papers, referencing 17 November 1928 assurances of Lovestone that Workers (Communist) Party never authorizes disorderly acts; and note the comments of Roger Baldwin in Les Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him: By Thirty-Three Comrades, Friends, and Relatives* (New York: Pathfinder, 1976), 48–50; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 67, where Cannon suggests he talked at the Plenary for "about two hours" before 150–200 Party functionaries; A.J. Rose F. Carey (?) (Philadelphia) to Cannon, 18 January 1929, Box 3, Folder 2, JPC Papers; Gitlow, *The Whole of Their Lives*, 234; Cannon, "Our Appeal to the Party Members," *The Militant*, 1 January 1929, which contains a section on "Bureaucracy and Gangsterism," and notes that Cannon was allowed "one hour and no more," a point confirmed in Cannon's description of the proceedings in Cannon to Swaback, no date [December 1928], Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL.

39 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 67; Barney Mass to Jim (Detroit), 17 December 1928, Reel 6, Russian Center, PRL.

lessen. In the process it would reach out of New York into most locales where the Left Opposition struggled to establish roots.

Public meetings of American Trotskyists, with Cannon and Shachtman speaking on "The Truth About Trotsky and the Russian Opposition," were announced for, respectively, New Haven, Connecticut and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Cannon, speaking first in New Haven on 21 December 1928 at the Labor Lyceum, got the rougher ride and was ill-prepared for the attack on the meeting. An organized contingent of Party supporters took over the hall and did their utmost to prevent Cannon from addressing the forum. He struggled to be heard, but for more than an hour "continuous interruptions and disorder" prevailed, and the working-class audience grew more and more antagonized. Someone called the police, who showed up on the pretense of quelling a riot. Cannon demanded that the gendarmes withdraw, as communists had no need of protection from those whose job it was to arrest and imprison revolutionaries. The cops did indeed go, but returned a short time later to close down the proceedings, claiming that the meeting lacked a proper permit. As the audience dispersed, protesting both the actions of the law and order brigade and the hooliganism of the Workers (Communist) Party, Cannon was taken into police custody, only to be released after the angry crowd melted away. Shachtman's 27 December Philadelphia forum went off without a hitch, a Workers Defense Guard mobilized to insure the speaker's freedom of expression. The successful night saw Shachtman speak for two-and-a-half hours and answer questions for another sixty minutes.⁴⁰

When *The Militant* announced a follow-up New York evening lecture by Cannon, to be held at the Labor Temple on 14th Street near Second Avenue, the Stalinists boycotted the event. No doubt there was something of a Workers Defense Guard present, but the Trotskyists used an ingenious means of keeping hooligans away. With few direct supporters to rally, Cannon and his Left Oppositionist ranks drew on their longstanding labor defense connections to twin a talk on Trotsky with the final statement of an about-to-be class war prisoner. Martin Abern chaired the meeting and introduced speakers. Warming the crowd up for Cannon was a young fur worker, Maurice L. Malkin, who addressed "the frame-up system" of American justice, talking of the Court of Appeals confirmation of his five-year prison sentence, handed down because of his activities in the 1926 Mineola furriers' strike. Long defended by Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman in their capacity as International Labor Defense leaders, Malkin and others gravitated to the Left Opposition immediately after the

40 "A National Organizational Tour," *The Militant*, 1 January 1929.

Trotskyists were turfed out of the Workers (Communist) Party in October. Preparing to go to jail in two days' time, Malkin reaffirmed his commitment to communism and its Party, but did so as an advocate of the Russian Opposition.

Malkin and Cannon were refused the right to speak at an ILD rally called to protest the convictions of the fur workers. Malkin indicated he would attend the event and ask for the floor to speak: the meeting was cancelled abruptly. The *Daily Worker*, expected to take up the cause of Malkin and another convicted furrier on the eve of their departure for prison, backed away from a forthright defense. New York's first public meeting of American Trotskyists was thus to be Malkin's send-off to Sing Sing. He received a rousing ovation from the crowd of 500, which contained a number of Malkin's Amalgamated Fur, Dress, and Cloakmaker co-workers, as well as many leftists curious to hear about Trotsky and the Russian Opposition. Cannon then mounted the speaker's podium and lectured for two hours on Trotsky, drawing on an array of facts, documents, and arguments. Much of what the American Left Opposition leader had to say was presented to a mass audience for the first time. Particularly popular with those assembled was Cannon's discussion of how the once-prominent Trotsky had been air-brushed out of the history of the Russian Revolution, even to the point of his visual presence being cut from every scene of the popular film, "Ten Days That Shook the World." With the closing of the speeches, the Left Opposition hosted "a farewell party" for Malkin that "lasted till a late hour."⁴¹ This was a cleverly-constructed calm before the Stalinist storm, which would turn, in Gitlow's words, "many a Trotsky meeting into a bloody battleground."⁴²

As the New Haven, Philadelphia, and New York meetings were being organized, the Lovestone leadership of the Workers (Communist) Party was clearly licensing violence on the streets of New York and in the labor halls of eastern-

41 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 68–69 insists that this first meeting, advertised in *The Militant*, 1 January 1929 was protected by sympathizers prepared to defend it from disruption. But all reports indicate that the forum went off without a hitch. "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 177–181 suggests that the first public New York meeting of the Trotskyists was called off because of fear of a riot, but he is referring to a February 1928 meeting discussed below. For more on this initial event see M.L. Malkin, "A Worker Talks to the Bureaucrats," *The Militant*, 1 January 1929; "Malkin and Franklin Go to Prison," and "Our N.Y. Mass Meeting," *The Militant*, 15 January 1929. Malkin was denounced as "an open and avowed Trotskyite" to Jay Lovestone by the Organizational Secretary of District #3 (Philadelphia) in B. Herman (?) to Lovestone, 22 October 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL. There is a collection of Left Opposition leaflets advertising various forums in New York in Box 11, File 40, Abern Papers.

42 Gitlow, *The Whole of Their Lives*, 234.

seaboard states.⁴³ With guile giving way to gangsterism, Lovestone lieutenant Jack Stachel orchestrated two separate burglaries at the residence of Cannon and Rose Karsner, 340 East 19th Street. Obviously monitoring the movements of Cannon and Karsner, Stachel, supposedly aided by the business manager of the *Daily Worker*, bided his time until the couple left their apartment to attend the first branch meeting of the New York Left Opposition on 23 December 1928. The thieves jimmied the door locks, and ransacked the apartment from “top to bottom.” Scared off by the return of Cannon and Karsner in the evening, the burglars completed their work on 14 January 1929 with Cannon out-of-town on speaking engagements. The two break-and-enters netted the Central Executive Committee correspondence, mailing/subscription lists, editorial material, account and receipt books, banking information, bound publications of the communist movement, books, and some old private and personal documents.

As for Cannon’s and Karsner’s material losses, *The Militant* laid stress not on any pecuniary setbacks, which were negligible, but on “*the political significance of underworld methods in Party disputes.*” Asking, “*Who brings these absolutely unprecedented methods into factional disputes in the party?*” Cannon and his small Trotskyist nucleus declared, “Bureaucratism, expulsions, gangsterism and burglary are not isolated phenomena. They are all bound together and they are the expression and instruments of an adventurist leadership and an opportunist political line.” Corruption and underworld methods betrayed a lack of principle that defined Stalinist programmatic wavering. “They can change their slogans from ‘Fire Against the Left’ at the May Plenum to a hue and cry about the ‘Right Danger’ at the December Plenum, they can change from opposition to the building of new unions in April to the policy of organizing new unions overnight – and on paper – in August, without changing their fundamental position, and their completely cynical attitude.”⁴⁴

43 For a direct attack on Lovestone’s role see “On Hooliganism – (Yesterday and Today),” *The Militant*, 28 December 1929.

44 The above paragraphs draw on “A Burglary – Its Political Meaning,” *The Militant*, 1 January 1929; “The Central Committee Organizes Another Burglary,” *The Militant*, 15 January 1929; “The Mink,” *The Militant*, 1 February 1929; “Burglary Bolshevism,” *The Militant*, 1 October 1929; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 68; Harry Ring interview with James P. Cannon, 24 October 1972, 12–13, in possession of the author [hereafter Ring interview]; Gitlow, *I Confess*, 491; Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 372; James O’Neal and G.A. Werner, *American Communism: A Critical Analysis of its Origins, Development, and Programs* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1947), 215–217; *Daily Worker*, 27 December 1928; 8 January 1929; *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, 561–571; “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 191–194; Jay Lovestone to Dear Comrades, 27 December 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; Cowl to Cannon, 2 January 1929, Box 1, “Breitman File,” Carl Cowl Papers, Tamiment Institute, Bobst Library, New York University, New York, New

As the nascent Trotskyist movement in America struggled to bring its message to those sincere in their revolutionary beliefs and commitments it found itself, in the period February – April 1929, confronting increasing levels of violence. A 26 February 1929 Labor Temple mass meeting of 600, gathered to hear Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman discuss the situation in Russia and protest Trotsky's deportation from the Soviet Union, was successfully broken up by an armed phalanx of 75–100 Party members and Young Workers League recruits. Their two-stage assault on the meeting, initiated in the lobby as demands for free admission (on the grounds that paid Party functionaries were unemployed workers) threatened a mass invasion. This resulted in a brawl that left some Oppositionists battered and bloody. Inside the hall, a disruptive Stalinist contingent drowned out speakers with boisterous renditions of "The International." Individuals rushed the stage, trying to take over the speaker's podium. An hour of this bedlam culminated in blows, and two Oppositionists suffered beatings, one having his face slashed with a knife. Police from the Industrial and Bomb squads were quick to arrive on the scene and when Abern, chairing the meeting, insisted that they leave or the forum would be discontinued, it was all over but a bit more shouting.

Adjourning in defeat, the Trotskyists promised to reconvene, and began to piece together a Workers Defense Guard to preserve workers' democracy and free speech. In mid-March 1929, the Labor Temple was again secured to hold a meeting to protest Trotsky's exile. The Oppositionists rallied to their cause a committee of the Industrial Workers of the World, beefed up ranks of Hungarian and Italian Oppositionists, some sturdy young plumbers' apprentices and, quite possibly, a contingent of "Carlo Tresca's disciples." The latter group, consolidating around Cannon's old anarchist friend, was keen to "defend [Left Opposition] meetings in New York against the Stalinist hooligans trying to break them up." Civil liberties advocate Dr. Edmund Chafee appeared on behalf of the ACLU, noting that his organization had always defended the Communist Party's right to hold public meetings, and it would do the same for the Opposition. When "Lovestone's scouts" attempted to storm the forum

York [uncatalogued]. In a Report to the Communist International Jay Lovestone reported that, "George Mink, head of the Seamen's Bureau, and delegate to the last Profintern Congress, has been removed from Party office. He secretly gave Cannon a donation." Mink was subsequently reinstated. See Jay Lovestone, "International Connections of Trotskyism in America," no date, [January 1929], Reel 6, Russian Center, PRL. See also "Copies of Letters Sent Re Communist Raid on Trotskyite Jim Cannon's Apartment-Headquarters," including Armistead Collier to Roger Baldwin, no date [January 1929], Reel 20, JPC Papers; Mike Taber, "Papers Stolen 70 Years Ago Tell History of Communist Movement in the United States," *The Militant*, 26 May 1997.

through a back door, they were physically rebuffed by the Workers Guard stationed there. Some of Cannon's Hungarian supporters had to be restrained from taking a conveniently-available fire axe to the Party invasion. One Workers (Communist) Party recruit was roughed up when he attacked the stage with a large stick. The "pogrom against the Opposition" was beaten back, and hecklers within the crowd were escorted out of the hall if they insisted on yelling during the speeches of Cannon and Shachtman. Known Stalinist functionaries were refused admission, and Bill Dunne was apparently among them. Again, the police appeared, called by the fearful manager of the hall, who worried that property would be damaged in a repeat of the 26 February 1929 debacle. When the cops suggested that "the hoodlums" be let back into the meeting, the Workers Defense Guard refused, and stood its ground. Eventually the police called it a night and left. Such verbal jousting as continued saw the Trotskyists best their opponents. Sam Gordon remembered that Shachtman handled one "CP 'commando' assigned to break up the meeting" with his "usual verve ... [winning] the crowd around after rallies of laughter that reduced the Stalinists to silence." This set the stage for Cannon, who spoke more quietly, his tenor-voice lecture addressing "internationalism and communism, how the two were inseparable, how the task that the Left Opposition had set itself was to reestablish this fact here and in the world movement." Gordon later recalled that, "Jim's speech left a powerful impression on me, and I believe I was won over to Trotskyism then and there." Standing up to Stalinism, according to an account in *The Militant*, strengthened "the fighting spirit of the Opposition workers" and presaged the formation of a United Front against "fascist methods in the labor movement."⁴⁵

45 The above paragraphs draw on "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 177–182, which confuses some details of different meetings, but nonetheless captures well the substance of Stalinist gangsterism and the Trotskyist response. The best accounts appear in "Lovestone Gangsters Stage Riot at New York Meeting to Protest Against Deportation of L.D. Trotsky," *The Militant*, 15 February 1929; Paul Green, member of Young Workers League, to the Editor of the Daily Worker, under title "A League Member on the New York Meeting," and "Proletarian Youth Against Gangsterism," *The Militant*, 1 March 1929; "New York Workers Protest Trotsky's Exile: Stalinites Plan Pogrom – and Stage Fizzle," *The Militant*, 15 March 1929; Ring interview, 12 October 1973, 7; and Sam Gordon in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 52–55. See also Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 72; and Shachtman, "25 Years of American Trotskyism," 12. Dunne's presence is mentioned in Glotzer to Shachtman, 3 April 1929, Roll 10/Reel 3353, Max Shachtman Papers, Tamiment Institute, Bobst Library, New York University, New York, New York, with Glotzer writing: "I am surprised that Bill Done, I like to spell it that way, came down to break up the meeting." The Ludwig Lore-edited *Volkszeitung* condemned the violence directed against Trotskyist meetings, drawing hostile comment in "Trotsky Writes in Enemy Press," *Daily Worker*, 13 March 1929. Lore's concern that the revolutionary movement was being discredited by Stalinist thug-

Manuel Gomez, one of Cannon's October 1928 inquisitors, left the Trotskyist March 1929 forum feeling "like a paladin." He later had cause to rethink his actions. "I tried to break it up," he confessed. "I went there, grabbed a front seat, tried to confuse the first speaker with persistent heckling, then jumped up and clamored for everybody to walk out. Classic Communist-gangster procedure. They'd expected it, and a 'security squad' gave me rough treatment. I was hustled from the hall with a black eye." Eventually disgusted with the degeneration of the Communist Party, of his own role in the expulsion of Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman, and his "outrageous conduct" at the mass meeting, Gomez dropped out, denounced in the pages of the *Daily Worker* as a "Trotskyite," written off as just another "renegade" who ended up on the wrong side of the barricades. "I never recovered from the shock," Gomez recounted in sadness.⁴⁶

If others within and around the Workers (Communist) Party experienced Stalinist gangsterism less cathartically than Gomez, they too registered their profound dissatisfaction. The New York 26 February meeting, for instance, elicited protests from Young Workers League (YWL) members and supporters, who called for "the end of the kind of work that the Party carried on at the Tuesday meeting." More emphatically, one YWL member condemned the "disgusting spectacle enacted as a consequence of Party tactics," pointing out that the violent disturbances were "in all cases ... provoked by Party or League members." The events were bad enough, but worse still was "the putrid report of the affair which appeared in the next day's issue of the *Daily Worker*." If nothing else was accomplished, this writer continued, "it gave conclusive proof that certain Party elements have nothing more to learn from capitalist teachers as far as gangster methods and maliciously false newspaper reporting are concerned." In offering his protest against such tactics, this YWLER claimed to be "expressing the attitude of many members who are not yet prepared to speak openly."

gery was dismissed: "discredited, supposedly, in the eyes of the Tammany Police who came to the aid of James P. Cannon and Company."

- 46 Shipman [Manuel Gomez], *It Had To Be Revolution*, 169, 172–174, 204–205. Shachtman to Glotzer, 1 April 1929, Reel 20, JPC Papers, described Gomez's treatment, and noted that if he, Abern, and Cannon had not urged the Defense Guard to "lay off, they would have given him a right royal polishing. We have a group of League members – plumbers' helpers – who swing an awful clip. Each of them has biceps like sewer pipes." In "Cannon Thugs Beat Workers," the *Daily Worker*, 20 March 1929 claimed that the "Trotskyist-Cannon meeting" was defended by police and gangsters, the latter "parked before the platform, eager to attack any workers who might try to denounce the Cannon crew." This account further claimed that as the meeting proceeded there "were about a thousand workers outside the hall, with more police, detectives, and capitalist press reporters arriving every few minutes."

The *Daily Worker* was even capable of suggesting that the Left Opposition combined reliance on the state forces of repression with racism in its ostensible defense of free speech, writing of the March 1929 Labor Temple New York meeting: "A Negro worker, Irving Dunjee, tried three times to gain admission, but was pushed out, and told by a policeman, apparently upon orders of the Cannonites at the door, 'Get away Nigger, you're not wanted here!'"

Shachtman insisted that Stalinist gangsterism "outraged" certain "members and sympathizers of the official party," and that within "the hearts of the better elements of the C.P. ranks" the violence of this period elicited shame rather than support. In hindsight, Philadelphia District Organizer and future leader of the Party's unemployed movement in the 1930s, Herbert Benjamin, recalled the viciousness and violence of the Workers (Communist) Party attacks on Cannon and other Left Oppositionists: "[Y]ou could have no political relationship with them. ... All friendships were completely ended, terminated, broken up ... there were violent attacks upon the Trotskyists ... attempts to prevent them from holding meetings of any kind, of seizing their records It was the most ruthless and most unethical kind of action, and was considered tolerable, permissible, in your relations with opponents." From Paterson, New Jersey, Helen Hunt wrote to *The Militant* that she attended Trotskyist meetings just to see "whether the W.P. would act like organized gangsters. If comrades break through the side doors at comrades' meetings, it is time for all Communists to think. Why does not the Party have open meetings to discuss the differences."⁴⁷

If New York was a center of Stalinist gangsterism, other districts were quick to follow the Party leadership's cues. Cannon undertook a January – February 1928 tour, taking his "The Truth about Trotsky and the Platform of the Opposition" talk to Boston, Akron, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, Minneapolis, and elsewhere. He then lectured again in places like Boston and Philadelphia in March. The Stalinist response differed in particulars here and there. Some locales were less able than others to mount a full-scale assault on the irksome Trotskyist meetings. At the first 15 February 1929 Boston forum, with Antoinette Konikow chairing the meeting, a "gang of Stalinist hoodlums ... was bent on breaking up the meeting," but thought discretion the better course when they saw a

47 The above paragraphs draw on "Proletarian Youth Against Gangsterism," and Paul Green, Member, YWL, to the Editor of the 'Daily Worker', *The Militant*, 1 March 1929; "An Answer to Gangsterism," *The Militant*, 15 April 1929; Shachtman, "25 Years of American Trotskyism," 12; "Cannon Thugs Beat Workers," *Daily Worker*, 20 March 1929; Herbert Benjamin, Outline of Unpublished Manuscript, "A History of the Unemployed Movement and Its Struggles During the Great Depression," quote from 109–110, also 70–71, 107–112, 150–152, 213–214, Columbia Oral History Project, Columbia University, New York, New York.

Defense Guard composed of IWW-recruited waterfront workers surrounding the platform. One old Wobbly who showed up to defend the sacred principle of freedom of speech had known Cannon since 1914. The audience of 300 listened to Cannon, who was more than capable of handling the hecklers: "they got so much the worst of the exchange that they only helped the meeting and discredited themselves." Just over a month later Cannon spoke again in Boston at the Chelsea Labor Lyceum. Party bureaucrats set up a "picket" on the sidewalk outside of the building, shouting at passersby that "a notorious counter-revolutionist is speaking inside." According to a report in *The Militant*, this "brought quite a number of curious people who paid twenty-five cents apiece to see the new attraction which they had not even heard of before."

In Philadelphia, the "Open Forum" saw Left Oppositionists selling *The Militant* at a Scott Nearing lecture confronted physically by Stalinists, but Cannon's St. Patrick's Day talk on Trotsky occurred without much in the way of interruption, in spite of a threat by Party District Organizer, the aforementioned Herbert Benjamin, to break up the meeting. More often, the proceedings were tumultuous. In Cleveland, District Organizer Israel Amter, an inveterate factionalist and former Goose Caucus spokesman turned Lovestoneite, led the charge. At a 12 January 1928 meeting of 200 enthusiastic workers, Cannon had been speaking for half an hour when "the hall was suddenly invaded by upwards of 60 rowdies." Pandemonium reigned as the Stalinist contingent sang at the top of their lungs what Cannon later characterized as a "college yell": "Hail, hail the gang's all here. To hell with Trotskyism, To hell with Trotskyism." As Cannon struggled to explain "the revolutionary significance" of the Opposition's criticisms, his speech was drowned out with cries of "counter-revolutionary," "traitor," "agent of American imperialism." The racket prohibited effective communication and discussion. With "brawlers [making] a mad rush towards the platform, hoping to break up the meeting by pulling down the speaker," the squadron of Workers Defense Guards mobilized to clear Amter and his followers from the hall. That done, the meeting continued until after midnight. Questions were answered, supporters consolidated and, in Cannon's words, "We had the most wonderful peace and quiet." At Cannon's Open Forum meeting in Philadelphia Stalinist goons were also repulsed. Victories such as these could, in certain circumstances, condition complacency.⁴⁸

48 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 69–72; "A National Organizational Tour," *The Militant*, 1 January 1929; "Cleveland Meeting Great Success," *The Militant*, 15 January 1929; "Other Meetings of the Opposition," *The Militant*, 15 February 1929; "Another Boston Meeting," *The Militant*, 1 April 1929; "Gangsterism in Philadelphia," *The Militant*, 15 April 1929; Cannon to Glotzer, 20 February 1929, Box 3, File 2, JPC Papers.

The Trotskyists, for instance, had unsurpassed support in Minneapolis, where recruits to the Left Opposition were known to be of the “tough proletarian” type. No special plans were made for Cannon’s 23 January 1929 lecture, booked for a small, local fraternal society hall. Nineteen-year old Fannie Curran, who first joined the YWL at the ripe age of fifteen, remembered that while “Jim warned us that we had better come to the meeting early and be prepared,” his claim that the Stalinists would try to smash up the event was not taken seriously, brushed off as so much hyperbole. “We just couldn’t visualize that the comrades whom we had known and worked with for years would go so far as a physical attack.” Yet it was perhaps precisely because of Minneapolis’s strength as a center of developing Trotskyism that the attack on the Left Opposition would be particularly brutal, uniting Lovestone and Foster supporters in acts of violence. Oscar Coover and Carl Skoglund arrived first, their job to handle tickets at the door. They were set upon by a Stalinist gang of thirty, outfitted with blackjacks and brass knuckles. Coover required hospitalization. With free access to the hall, the Stalinists occupied all the front seats. When Cannon appeared and commenced his lecture, the howling and cries of “counterrevolutionist,” “sniveling Trotskyite cur,” and “renegade” began. “Then,” in Curran’s words, “all hell broke loose.” In the ensuing “free-for-all” chairs were broken and the woman managing the building called the police. “Arrest him, he’s a counterrevolutionist!” roared one YWL zealot. As the police pulled Cannon off the podium and cleared the room, the Left Opposition experienced perhaps its worst defeat at the hands of Stalinist thuggery. For Cannon, it was “a rather scandalous and demoralizing thing.”

The nascent forces of Minneapolis Trotskyism were taught a valuable lesson: they, not the capitalist class, were now being regarded as the main enemy of their former comrades. Cannon would not leave Minneapolis in defeat, the legacy of a Stalinist routing of the first Trotskyist meeting in the city’s history hanging over militant heads for decades to come. He and others appealed to Minneapolis’s radical resentments that a “collaboration of the police and gangsters” had managed to suppress basic freedoms of assembly and expression. The Industrial Workers of the World canceled its Saturday night forum and, “as a demonstration against violation of the workers’ right of free speech,” rented the hall to Cannon and his comrades for a repeat of “The Truth About Trotsky” lecture. A Defense Guard was assembled, armed with oversized hatchet-handles purchased from a local hardware store; a handbill circulated indicating

See also Arne Swabeck, Unpublished, unpaginated autobiography, Chapter 13, “Autobiographies File,” Prometheus Research Library, New York, New York.

that the talk was to take place and would be defended against attack; and one of the Oppositionists boldly walked into the headquarters of the Workers (Communist) Party and “dared them to try to break up [the] meeting.” Over 250 packed the rww hall and listened to Cannon’s two-hour address. The Stalinists were a no-show. At the invitation of his Wobbly allies, Cannon appeared at their building the next night, presenting a forum on “Free Speech and the Labor Movement” to another large, and enthusiastic, audience. Cannon’s talk drew on an intimate understanding of American labor history, a hard-nosed appraisal of the balance of class forces in 1929, and an ardent defense of the tradition of struggle associated with freedom of expression from the time of the Haymarket martyrs into the 1920s. “This tradition must not be thrown away,” Cannon thundered, “The unrelenting fight for free speech is a fight for access to the masses.” Workers democracy demanded “The defeat of ... violence and suppression, of blackjacks and brass knuckles.” In driving these tactics from the workers’ movement a victory would be achieved “for communism and the working class.” To buttress his case, Cannon alluded to “the facts” of recent events in New York, Philadelphia, New Haven and, most recently, Minneapolis.⁴⁹

In supporting roles, Cannon’s Left Oppositionist comrades Max Shachtman, Maurice Spector, Martin Abern, and Arne Swabeck addressed audiences of up to 500 in New Haven, Toronto, St. Louis, Trenton, and Chicago. Swabeck was particularly active, talking in St. Louis and at a variety of Chicago venues, including the Karl Marx Club and the Plebeian Forum. When necessary, Workers Defense Guards were on hand to make sure that interference with the

49 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 71–72; Fannie Curran in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 81–82; Vincent Ray Dunne, “The Minneapolis Meetings,” *The Militant*, 1 February 1929; Cowl to Glotzer, 2 January 1929, Box 1, “Breitman File,” Carl Cowl Papers, Tamiment Institute, Bobst Library, New York University, New York, New York [uncatalogued]. Myers, *The Prophet’s Army*, 36 claims that the Left Oppositionists “hired strong-arm men to protect their speakers.” There is no evidence for this allegation, and the more likely explanation is that Cannon and his old organization, the rww, did in fact share a deep commitment to free speech in the workers movement, and were prepared to defend a basic principle. A later anti-communist cynic such as Gitlow, *The Whole of Their Lives*, 234 could flippantly attribute rww willingness to defend Cannon’s right to free speech to base motives. Gitlow claimed that the “seamen, lumberjacks, stevedores and migratory desperadoes” dispatched from Wobbly halls to help form the Workers Defense Guards were “all itching to put their hands on the communists who, they charged, wrecked their organization.” No doubt the rww disliked communists, Cannon among them, but it valued free speech more than it resented rivals in the revolutionary workers movement. See also Oneal and Werner, *American Communism*, 215. Cannon, of course, spoke at the Wobbly hall as a communist. See Cannon, Notes on “Free Speech in the Labor Movement,” (Speech at Minneapolis rww Forum, 20 January 1929), Reel 32, JPC Papers.

speaker was kept to a minimum. In Chicago, however, the Foster forces seemed to have displaced Lovestone's caucus in taking the lead in anti-Trotskyism. They attempted to disrupt one Swabeck forum and managed to have a talk at the Scandinavian Workers Club cancelled, the threat of "Party bureaucrats to smash the meeting violently" resulting in backtracking on the part of Club officials. Shachtman claimed that at a Salt Lake City meeting, in a scenario scripted out of the legends of the wild west frontier, a grizzled Irish-American civil libertarian chaired the meeting. As Party members threatened to attack the stage, the Chair pulled an old Colt-45 "log leg" out of his back pocket, laid it on the speaker's table with its lengthy barrel pointing at the crowd, and said, "The first son of a bitch who wants it is welcome to come up here and try and take it." That, according to Shachtman, "cooled ... off enormously" those who had "ideas of breaking up the meeting." In Los Angeles, Shachtman lacked such protection, and his speech was disrupted by an armed Workers (Communist) Party mob; the talk was eventually cancelled "after a dozen people on both sides of the fight lay beaten and bloody on the floor of the hall."

More than a year later, in July 1930, Shachtman was scheduled to talk in Cleveland on the Left Opposition and his European meetings with Trotsky. Stalinist subterfuge, and later violence, prohibited him from speaking. A union hall was rented for the night to host Shachtman's forum, but no one could be found to open it. Communist Party members milled about, smiling knowingly. An East Indian restaurateur sympathetic to the Left offered his facilities to Shachtman. Marching en masse to the new venue, the Left Oppositionist entourage was then confronted directly with Stalinist hooliganism. Unappeased by the decision to let ten of their number into the talk free of charge to speak their positions from the floor, the Stalinist "hoodlums" crashed the door creating a "violent disturbance." Blackjacks, knives, brass knuckles, clubs, and iron bars were apparently utilized as the free-for-all grew increasingly bloody. The police were called in to clear the restaurant, which was located only a few doors from Communist Party headquarters. Incensed at the "anti-working-class tactics of the Stalinists," Left Oppositionists and free-speech advocates, including a proverbial Wobbly contingent, then announced an open-air meeting at the Public Square for the next evening. Braving further violence, a possible repeat of police jailings, and the derisive cries of "counter-revolutionaries" and "enemies of the workers", 1,000 Cleveland radicals gathered as Shachtman climbed up on the speakers' stump and harangued the Stalinists for their "contemptible tactics imported into the labor movement from the armory of Mussolini, Lewis, Sigman and their ilk." Shachtman later recalled that there was hardly a Trotskyist meeting in the early 1930s at which he spoke, "from coast to coast," that did not face the threat of Communist violence. Such hooliganism, claimed the Cleve-

land reporter to *The Militant*, “only serve[s] to disgrace and discredit the whole communist movement” and “alienate the best sections of the working class.”⁵⁰

Stalinist thuggery was perhaps at its worst in New York in early April 1929, as separate May Day preparations were underway by both the now renamed Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA/CP) and the Left Opposition. A Hungarian contingent of Left Oppositionists, led by Louis Basky, played a prominent role in the Workers Defense Guards protecting New York meetings. This breakaway group from the powerful Hungarian section of the Party, which had long put out its own newspaper, *Uj Előre*, and initially harbored the much maligned Comintern emissary and architect of American Stalinism, John Pepper, was particularly reviled in the upper echelons of the Party and among some of its ethnic/national sections.⁵¹ There were undoubtedly those in the orchestrating machinery of gangsterism that viewed Cannon’s Hungarian caucus as particularly deserving of a thrashing.

On 9 April 1929, the small Hungarian Opposition group was holding its regular evening weekly meeting at the Hungarian Hall on East 79th Street when, midway through the proceedings, “an organized mob of Stalinist gangsters ... invaded the hall in a body.” Numbering anywhere from 10–50 (accounts vary wildly, according to the source), they overwhelmed the 15–20 Oppositionists, six of whom were women. Ostensibly armed with blackjacks, lead pipes, brass knuckles, rubber hose, and knives, they unleashed an unprovoked attack on Basky, about to initiate a discussion on the Platform of the Left Opposition. His 75-year old father, Lucas, a communist with decades of experience in the revolutionary movement, came to his defense. Struck on the head and knocked to the floor, the elder Basky’s wound later required stitches. Unprepared for the attack, the Hungarian Oppositionists got the worst of it, some of them requiring medical attention, as did one of the Party-led disrupters, Matthew Holzbauer, whom the *Daily Worker* account claimed was “nearly fatally stabbed.” Police eventually intervened, breaking up the *mélee* and making a number of arrests, charging Left Oppositionists as well as their assailants. Can-

50 The above paragraphs draw on “Other Meetings of the Opposition,” *The Militant*, 15 February 1929; “Two Meetings in Chicago,” *The Militant*, 1 April 1929; “Mass Meeting in Trenton,” *The Militant*, 15 April 1929; “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 186–188; Shachtman, “Radicalism in the Thirties: The Trotskyist View,” 19–21; Swabeck autobiography, Chapter 13; “Cleveland Workers Reply to Hooliganism,” *The Militant*, 12 July 1930.

51 There is much on Pepper in Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, and for more see Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 57–61; Sakmyster, “A Hungarian in the Comintern,” 57–72; “Epitaph for a Scoundrel: Pages from the Record of John Pepper,” *The Militant*, 1 March 1929; “Good-By Pepper: The Passing of an Adventurer,” *The Militant*, 1 October 1929.

non supporter, Edward Fenyes, was one of those arrested for felonious assault, and was originally held without bail, but later released on \$2000. That the leaders of the violent mob were paid Party functionaries, among them the editor of *Uj Elöre*, Emerich Lustig, and the manager of the Party's Hungarian Workers' Home, Gustav Mayer, was obscured by accounts in the official Communist press, which passed the incident off as the work of mostly anonymous "militant workers."

The Left Opposition promised more vigilance in the future, and announced that a May Day Mass Meeting, to be held at the Hungarian Hall on 30 April 1929, featuring Cannon, Abern, and speakers in both Hungarian and Italian, would be defended by an enhanced Workers Defense Guard. In addition, a protest meeting to eviscerate "the methods of the Stalinites against the Opposition" was organized. Cannon wrote to Swabeck and Spector on the success of the event, which brought out a full contingent of Wobblies, one of whom spoke before the repulsion of a Stalinist raid. "[B]eaten off by the famous Workers Self Defense Guard," the Communist Party contingent retreated with "more speed than dignity ... [pouring] out of the narrow hall like rain out of a water spout." Calling on every "class conscious worker inside and outside the party" to raise loud voices against "gangster methods in the labor and revolutionary movements and join the struggle against them," Cannon and the ranks of the Left Opposition nonetheless had to swallow hard and acknowledge something of a defeat. While they organized successful May Day events in Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Cleveland, and St. Louis, mass united front rallies of all worker organizations were generally thwarted by the Communist Party. In New York, the management of the Hungarian Hall, fearing another larger and even bloodier riot, rescinded its rental agreement with the Left Opposition in a last-minute cancellation that wrote *finis* to any 1929 Trotskyist May Day meeting in New York City.⁵²

52 The above paragraphs draw on "Another Stalinist Pogrom in New York," *The Militant*, 15 April 1929; "Our May Day Meetings," and "The Splitters in St. Louis," *The Militant*, 1–15 May, 1929; Cannon to Swabeck, 20 April 1929; Cannon to Spector, 20 April 1929, both in Box 3, File 2, JPC Papers. Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 72–73, written in 1944, contains some confusions and some admissions that obviously would not have been prudent with charges pending against his comrades in 1929. Among the confusions are the mistaken notion that the attack on the Hungarian Hall took place *after* a successful May Day meeting, which was obviously not the case. Cannon actually describes an upper East Side May Day celebration at the Hungarian Hall, in which the Stalinists were rebuffed. "We held the meeting in peace," he claimed. His account then suggests that the attack on the Hungarian Oppositional group's closed business meeting was waged "to take revenge" because the May Day celebration had beaten the Stalinists back. This is clearly

As Cannon suggested in *The History of American Trotskyism*, a grudging Stalinist recognition slowly emerged that the Trotskyists could not be trampled on at will. Writing to Spector in April 1929, Cannon, perhaps over-optimistic, suggested that, “we are close to the defeat of the hoodlum tactic.” But the thug-gery still astounded him. He wrote to Vincent Ray Dunne about the violence of the Foster elements in Left Opposition New York meetings: “The corruption of these fakers is simply unbelievable. ... The interests of the movement and its reputation before the workers are small consideration.” It was all about making “good with Stalin at all costs.” If violence was instigated against them, Left Oppositionists were prepared to stand their ground and defend their right to assemble and to exercise free speech. The Hungarian Hall “pogrom” had proven that, if nothing else. With numbers, arms, and the element of surprise all in the favor of the CP goons, the premeditated and unprovoked gang attack undoubtedly took its toll. Yet at least one “Stalinist thug” had ended up hospitalized. The Left Oppositionists had no time for arguments that two wrongs did not make a right:

People who raid a peaceful meeting of workers, who are capable of murderously assaulting women and an old man of 75 years with gas pipes and

a lapse in memory, and constitutes one of the few places where Cannon's recollection of events can be definitively faulted. Cannon's account is also, however, perhaps more truthful than contemporary *Militant* descriptions, in as much as it relates how an Oppositionist woodworker used one of the tools of his trades – undoubtedly a knife – to defend the elder Basky against the beating he was suffering at the hands of two Stalinists. The resulting injuries to Holzbauer, designated “a militant Hungarian worker” in the official Communist Press, were serious enough to require weeks of hospitalization, and Cannon later commented that “the doctors [were] uncertain whether he was going to pull out of it or not.” To have acknowledged this in 1929 would almost certainly have made a court conviction of a comrade more likely. The “official communist” account appears in “Basky, Trotskyite Has Thugs Attack Workers; Swear Out Warrants – Cannon Gangsters Stab Militant Worker; Use Tammany Police; Attack USSR,” *Daily Worker*, 11 April 1929. Its allegations that the Baskys preferred charges against their “militant worker” opponents were denied in *The Militant* account cited above. Whether the Hungarian Hall meeting was a closed business meeting of a particular language-section of the Left Opposition, as Cannon later stated, or a small weekly event open to Hungarian-speakers, remains unclear. Whatever the case, the presence of a contingent of “militant workers,” some of whom did not apparently speak Hungarian, at such an event goes unexplained in the *Daily Worker* account, as does the orchestrated leadership of the group and its obvious commitment to disrupt a small, peaceful assembly. If the New York Opposition failed to mount a May Day event, it nonetheless produced a political statement: “May Day – And After,” *The Militant*, 1–15 May 1929.

brass knuckles, definitely place themselves in the category of criminals toward whom 'labor ethics' have no application. Every honest worker will uphold the right of self-defense against them.

Moreover, when it came to public meetings and the right of the Left Opposition to discuss openly their criticisms of what was happening inside the Soviet camp, there were those in the workers' movement holding no brief for Trotskyist ideas who were committed to defending the principle of open discussion on the left taking place unhampered by violence. Covington Hall, noted Wobbly bard and then-editor of *The Industrial Democrat* in Newllano, Louisiana, was one of them. He wrote Cannon that he wanted nothing to do with "the Stalinist Communists, for they have put themselves in a position where no other group will trust them around the corner much less take part in anything they ramrod." When former Communist textile and coal miner organizer George Saul spoke for the Left Opposition in Denver, Colorado, members of the Farmer-Labor Party who believed in "free speech and free assembly" showed up *en masse* to defend the meeting against CPers sent to "break up" the talk. According to Saul, it was an uncharacteristically large Chinese man who actually preserved the peace. With the first signs of hooliganism, the physically intimidating Asian worker "doubled up his fist," declaring defiantly, "Whoever will try to stop the speaker will get it."⁵³

The physical attacks and gangster disruptions of Trotskyist meetings that defined much of the relations of the Cannon forces and the official Communist Party in 1929–30 lessened over the course of the early 1930s. They revived, however, as Trotskyism appeared to gain credibility with its forceful critique of the Communist International's failure to mount an effective challenge to the consolidation of Nazism in Germany. For the emerging Left Opposition, Stalinist violence thus remained decisively important.

Harry Roskolenko, an aspiring poet who was an early recruit to Trotskyism, and who joined the Communist Party in order to promote the politics of the Left Opposition only to find himself summarily expelled for his heretical positions, likened the gangsterism of his political opponents to a "baptism." "We

53 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 73; Shachtman, "25 Years of American Trotskyism," 12–13; Cannon to Vincent Ray Dunne, 1 April 1929; Cannon to Spector, 1 April 1929, Box 3, File 2; Covington Hall to Dear Cannon, 14 July 1930, Box 3, File 3, JPC Papers; George James Saul, "The Making of a Rebel in America: An Unfinished Autobiography," Unpublished typescript, 72, Frank Lovell Papers (Weissman Collection), consulted with permission at residence of Frank Lovell, New York, New York, April 1994.

were the gentler folk," he wrote, "the people of ideas. We could talk, and we talked to everybody. Men should use their ears, not their fists, we said." It was one thing to understand that "socialism in one country" had to be defeated as an animating idea within the revolutionary party, because not to do so was to suffocate the beautiful ideal of world revolution on which so much had been sacrificed and so much already, in the case of the Russian Revolution, built. It was quite another to experience first-hand the violence that aimed not only to intimidate those "with the most perspicacious insight into Stalinism," but to draw a political line in blood between the official Communist Party and its members and the "unofficial opposition" of Trotskyists. As Shachtman later stressed, "the virulent violence of the Stalinists made a deep impression upon us."

Roskolenko recalled attending a 1932 rally at which a professorial-looking J. Louis Engdahl expounded the sectarian, Third Period attacks on so-called social fascists, insisting that Stalin's Comintern would alone defeat Hitler. It was supposedly necessary to fight to the death against both the "capitalist masters of fascism" and the "fascist nature" of all non-Communist misleaders on the left. Quaking in his dissident boots, Roskolenko stood in the question period to denounce Engdahl's divisiveness. He spoke of the necessity of forging a "real united front" that was the only way to defeat Hitler. Shouting over "the cat-calls ... from Engdahl's front-bench clique," Roskolenko insisted that "prattling about socialist leaders being *social-fascist*" had to come to an end, that the term was a meaningless and pejorative "word invented by Stalin." Engdahl fumed on the stage, interjecting with a shouted threat: "You Trotskyists take your lives in your hands when you come here to make counter-revolutionary speeches. I am not responsible for anything that happens to you when you leave!" Roskolenko took the rejoinder as "an invitation to beat hell out of me." After the meeting, as he was selling *The Militant* and urging the dispersing crowd "to fight Hitler and not each other," Roskolenko was jumped by three leather-jacketed assailants. As they beat and kicked him senseless, onlookers formed a circle around the fallen Trotskyist and egged on the violence. Roskolenko woke up in the hospital, offering a wry post-mortem: "Three teeth were gone and my testicles were hardly in a masculine shape."

America's first Left Oppositionists thus became steeled in the conviction that "any group in the labor movement that resorts to violence against any other group in it – except in self-defense" had to be both exposed and opposed, and resolutely so. And they understood well that winning "free speech from Stalinist gangsters" had nothing to do "with a change of heart on their part." Rather, as Shachtman later stated, "organized Stalinist gangsterism ... subsided only when groups of sturdy, valiant and resolute militants – female as well as male! –

drummed some wholesome homilies in workers' democracy into the skulls of hooligans." The Left Opposition, he concluded, was "certainly not weaned on meek milk."⁵⁴

As the Communist League of America (Opposition) began to challenge the Communist Party more aggressively and openly, moving away from considering its primary task to be winning party members to its positions, it faced a wave of revived hooliganism. Cannon's organizers in Cleveland were writing to him of the violence they experienced in early 1933: Sam Gordon was given "a severe beating when he attended an unemployment City Council meeting," waylaid by about 20 Stalinists. Hugo Oehler was certain that there would be an attempt to break-up the scheduled Left Opposition meeting in February 1933, but he reported to Cannon that, "The comrades were prepared and after the meeting were very glad to note that the first successful meeting without Stalinist disruption had been held in Cleveland. The first, after all these years, the comrades say."⁵⁵

The news was not always this heartening. By the end of 1933, with the CLA constantly exposing the failure of the Comintern to combat the rise of fascism in Germany and about to embark on the formation of a new Party affiliated with a new International, the Communist Party's seemingly instinctual recourse to physical intimidation, hooliganism, and violence revived. Arne Swabeck spoke at a Chicago Left Opposition meeting on the triumph of fascism in Germany, the consequent destruction of the powerful German Communist Party, and the weakening of the world forces of Revolution. An organized body of 150 Stalinists disrupted the forum. They marched en masse to the CLA headquarters where the talk was scheduled to take place, chaired by Albert Glotzer, and established a picket line outside, telling those arriving for the discussion that the meeting had been canceled or was moved to another locale. Inside the hall, Stalinists demanded that they elect a Chair of the proceedings. Rebuffed by the CLA, unaligned workers, and other groups in attendance, Communist Party advocates proceeded to conduct their own meeting, one of their number speaking from a bench. Turmoil ensued. Only after a fight drove some of the disrupters from the hall did the meeting continue, under Glotzer's assurances that

54 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 73; Shachtman, "25 Years of American Trotskyism," 12–13; Harry Roskolenko, *When I Was Last On Cherry Street* (New York: Stein and Day, 1965), 134–136.

55 See, for instance, "A Gangster Assault: An Oppositionist Beaten in the Union Office," *The Militant*, 15 September 1929; "Cleveland Workers Reply to Hooliganism," *The Militant*, 12 July 1930; "Wipe Hooliganism Out of the Movement!" *The Militant*, 1 October 1930; Hugo Oehler to Cannon, [no date, February 1933], Reel 3, JPC Papers.

“representatives of every point of view in the workers movement” would speak from the floor. In the end, CP spokesman Jack Spiegel rose to counter Swabeck’s speech, insisting that in Hitler’s Germany the revolutionary communist underground was now stronger than ever, denouncing the Left Opposition. He called on his followers to leave the hall, which they did, singing “Solidarity.” Before they left, however, a few more tussles had taken place, a collection hat rifled, and a back room in the meeting place treated as a urinal. *The Militant* editorialized on the need to establish workers’ defense guards to “defend the right of free speech in the labor movement and teach a lesson to those who interfere with it. The sooner such a workers’ guard is organized and gets into action the sooner the movement will be liberated from the scourge of hooliganism.”

Lydia Beidel resigned from the Communist Party early in 1933. After twelve years of membership in the movement, she was dissatisfied and disappointed with the Comintern’s explanations of what had happened to its affiliated Party in Germany. She wrote to Earl Browder to protest the behavior of his comrades at the Left Opposition meeting. Identifying the leaders of the Stalinist thugs, among them Spiegel and African American District Committee member, David Poindexter, Beidel denounced what she insisted was a brazen attempt to break up the Swabeck meeting. “They precipitated a riot,” she wrote, “in which literature and furniture were destroyed, workers were beaten up and trampled upon, and such a commotion developed that the police came into the hall from the street.” Sickened by “facing so vicious and irresponsible and anti-social a mob as the one that came last Sunday under the banner of the Communist Party,” Beidel was adamant that thuggery had no place in the workers’ movement. “A Party which cannot raise the intellectual and moral level of the proletariat but on the contrary trains fine elements down to the depth of gangsters has no right to use the name Communist,” she concluded sharply.⁵⁶

The Chicago debacle was repeated elsewhere. In Montreal a young CLAer, William Krehm, was physically assaulted when speaking from the floor at a public forum; Opposition delegates to an anti-Fascist conference were rudely ejected; posters announcing League events were torn down and defaced; and

56 The above paragraphs draw on “Gangster Attack on Chicago League Meet,” and “United Front Against Hooliganism,” *The Militant*, 28 October 1933; Lydia Beidel, “An Open Letter to Browder: On Hooliganism,” *The Militant*, 4 November 1933. Spiegel and Poindexter are referred to often in Storch, *Red Chicago*, and Storch interviewed Spiegel in 1996. While Storch’s book reveals that Spiegel and Poindexter were volatile, sectarian, and staunchly loyal to Stalinism she does not probe the issue of virulent anti-Trotskyism because her book understates significantly the hostility directed by the Communist Party towards its Left Opposition critics. Beidel is mentioned in passing in Storch’s account, but there is apparently no recognition that she embraced Trotskyism and rejected Stalinism.

Stalinist picket lines were set up outside halls where Left Opposition speakers had been announced. "Political bankruptcy breeds inevitably the methods of hooliganism," concluded the report from Canada.⁵⁷

Undaunted by yet more acts of CP hooliganism in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, Max Shachtman wrote an Open Letter to the District Committee of the Communist Party demanding the disciplining of those Party/YCL members who violated workers' democracy. Shachtman announced that as long as Left Opposition meetings were subjected to CP thuggery, further meetings would take place where the unfinished business of disrupted forums would be conducted to their proper conclusion. Inviting the Communist Party-controlled International Labor Defense to send a representative to help defend the meeting, Shachtman pointed out that the ILD "has as one of its declared aims the defense of workers' meetings from attack and/intervention from the police," and the disruptiveness that characterized a Brownsville meeting is "directly responsible for the intervention of police in labor gatherings." Protests also arose as Stalinists stalked Left Oppositionists and sympathizers, threatening them with beatings if they distributed leaflets and engaged in other political activities.⁵⁸

The most tragic use of violence against the Left Opposition culminated in the death of two communist workers in an orchestrated August 1932 Communist Party attack on soap-boxing Trotskyists in New York City's Lower East Side. Party leaders, stung by the usual criticisms of their Third Period sectarianism and its ineffectiveness in halting Hitler, inflamed the ranks with "a lynch spirit against the Trotskyites." On 20 August 1932, the small agitational army of Trotskyists plopped down their soap box and their prop, the American flag ostensibly required by law for all street meetings, setting up their rabble-rousing shop as usual on the corner of Seventh Street and Avenue A. There they readied themselves to address a gathering crowd on the situation in Germany. Assailed by a "surging, singing, howling" throng, the Trotskyists were forced to disperse. As Roskolenko remembered, "It was always a riot when they came." Amidst the chaos, a signal from a designated comrade on the ground apparently led to bricks and heavy granite cobblestones being thrown from the top of a darkened

57 "Montreal Stalinists Answer Marxian Ideas with Hooliganism," *The Militant*, 16 December 1933.

58 "Gangsterism Again!" and "Hooliganism Spreads to Brooklyn," *The Militant*, 23 December 1933. See also "Left Oppositionist Assaulted by YCLers," *Young Spartacus*, March 1933; "United Front Against Hooliganism in L.A.," and "Wipe Out this Hooliganism," *The Militant*, 5 May 1934; "'United Front' in Chicago: Stalinists Celebrate May Day by hooligan Attack on International Communists in Parade," *The Militant*, 12 May 1934.

roof. The crowd rushed for cover, but when the dust cleared and the shock subsided, two communist workers, Michael Semen and Nick Krusiuk, were seriously injured. Semen succumbed almost immediately, and Krusiuk was taken to hospital, where he later died. Blind hatred of "Trotskyites" prompted a rash, murderous act.

At the time, few knew for certain who was responsible for the heavy missiles that rained down on the soap-boxing corner. Originally, Left Oppositionists put forward the view that the attack was undertaken by reactionary anti-communists of the Black Legion stripe. For its part, the upper echelons of the Communist Party that undoubtedly knew better immediately pointed the finger directly at the sinister "Trotskyites." In the pages of the *Daily Worker*, and in leaflets in English, Russian, and Ukrainian, the murders were attributed to the Left Opposition. *The Militant* claimed that, "There is taking place a general campaign of incitement for a pogrom against us which also has the elements of provocation to the authorities." It deplored the "vicious campaign" as a "desperate last resort," in which the "depraved Stalinist bureaucracy" had finally stooped "to the lowest depths" of its general method of "physical violence in place of political argumentation."

In this climate of hatred and retribution, Trotskyists postponed all street meetings and arranged for the guarding of their headquarters. The Left Oppositionists also demanded a public, open air, hearing on "the Stalinist frame-up." As various labor and civil liberties organizations signed on to the proposed meeting, the Communist Party lapsed into silence, effectively withdrew its allegations of Trotskyist responsibility, and ignored the call for a workers' inquiry into the events of August 1932. But the CLA's Branch Organizer, Hugo Oehler, and Tom Stamm, Chairman of the original Trotskyist street meeting, were summoned to appear before the District Attorney. Before all of this happened, thousands of communists heard Party leaders denounce the Trotskyists at a 23 August 1932 rally. Party organs were filled with "venomous lynch propaganda." A march from the Lower East Side to Union Square inflamed a Communist Party crowd, which raised clenched fists in the air, shouting in hate: "Death to the Trotskyites. Death to All Renegades."⁵⁹

59 The above paragraphs draw on ONeal and Werner, *American Communism*, 216; Gitlow, *The Whole of Their Lives*, 233–235; Roskolenko, *When I Was Last On Cherry Street*, 135–136; Minutes of National Committee, Communist League of America, #110, 25 August 1932; #111, 1 September 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, George Breitman Papers, Tamiment Institute, Bobst Library, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter GB Papers]; "Stalinists in Monstrous Frame-Up Against Left Opposition," *The Militant*, 27 August 1932; "The Stalinist Bureaucrats Back Out on Murder Frame-Up Hearing," *The Militant*, 3 September 1932;

This, in Shachtman's phrasing, was "the heart of darkness of Stalinism itself."⁶⁰ The substance of the Trotsky-Stalin opposition was always fundamentally a principled refusal of advocates of internationalism and World Revolution to countenance the parochial defeatism wrapped up in the seemingly innocuous slogan of "socialism in one country." But at a visceral level, the opposition was experienced as violence and arbitrary, bureaucratic abuses of power that were themselves the antithesis of relations that revolutionary communists aspired to promote and create. In the United States this experience of Stalinism was often exhibited at its most dramatic in streets adjacent to Union Square, and in labor lyceums from Philadelphia to Minneapolis. There Left Oppositionists tasted blood at the hands of an army of redressers that they had, mere months before, marched alongside as brothers and sisters.

The original Left Opposition that first elicited this kind of violent Stalinist retribution was not just any political adversary. To a consolidating American Stalinism, Trotskyism represented the return and challenge of its repressed unconscious, a rude reminder of what it had once been but could no longer legitimately claim. It had to be vanquished. Fanning irrational flames of implacable enmity against "Trotskyite counterrevolutionaries" was, by 1929–30, second nature to those Party leaders intent on staying in the good graces of the Comintern's cynical Stalinist forces or naïve enough to think that the spoils of office could be theirs alone if only they were able to maneuver effectively enough against their critics, domestic and international. Cannon's counterparts – Lovestone, Foster, and Browder – made their bed within the Stalinist house, and they were going to remain within that domicile as long as they were allowed to be there, a sufferance that would vary greatly in duration and in the hospitality extended.⁶¹ Many secondary cadre and rank-and-file communist militants succumbed to this irrationality and, as Paul Jacobs has suggested, it penetrated deep into their being, staying with them for decades and drowning their intellect in a venomous, often overpowering, unreason.⁶² Yet there were those communists who, in this formative moment of 1928–29 stared into this Stalinist abyss, determined that it was not where they could take their stand against capitalism's inequalities, injustices, and indignities. They would find in Trotskyism an alternative, and they would be the Left Opposition's recruits.

"Police Act on Stalinist Frame-Up," *The Militant*, 10 September 1932; "A Frame-Up Against Left Opposition," *Young Spartacus*, September 1932.

60 Shachtman, "25 Years of American Trotskyism," 13.

61 Cannon's comments on these three leaders, offered throughout *The First Ten Years of American Communism*, remain insightful.

62 See the brief commentary in Jacobs, *Is Curly Jewish?* 30–32.

5 Recruiting the American Left Opposition: Three Phases

Stalinism created Trotskyism and, in the case of the United States, it pushed revolutionaries into the original ranks of the Left Opposition. Had there been no Trotskyism, Stalinism would almost certainly have either invented it or created some other internal target that could be used to foment the irrationality that proved so useful in the consolidation of absolute power.⁶³

The Stalinist push that was fundamental in the recruitment of the original American Left Opposition occurred in three overlapping but distinct phases. Cannon was, in varying ways, pivotally important as a core element around which those dissatisfied with Stalinism might rally, regardless of how they found their way to Trotskyism. Recruitment was thus a two-way process, in which Left Oppositionists were pushed by Stalinism and pulled by Cannon and the existence of an alternative communism.

First, came a critical contingent of leadership elements Cannon himself won over directly and personally, all of whom were readied for recruitment by their experiences in the Workers (Communist) Party over the course of the 1920s. Second, as the official Stalinist approach to Cannon's consolidating Trotskyism moved from guile to gangsterism, autocratic and violent measures forced a number of more distant recruits into the camp of the Left Opposition via expulsion or revulsion. Third, as the original leadership group consolidated and was supplemented by a rank-and-file often expelled by the Party for the flimsiest of reasons, disparate clusters of oppositional forces, scattered and somewhat incoherent in their anti-Stalinist politics, came out of the woodwork to join, often somewhat incompletely, with Cannon. If the Left Opposition was, to be sure, able to win some independent leftists to its cause,⁶⁴ the number of such recruits paled in comparison to those pushed into Trotskyism by Stalinism and pulled by Cannon and his allies. Independent recruits drawn to the new movement, moreover, were almost certainly won to the Left Opposition at least in part because they could contrast how Trotskyists discussed and debated ideas with the behavior of the Communist Party. As Paul Jacobs later noted, writing about his experience in the mid-1930s, those who came to Cannon's camp were

63 Thus, with any serious Trotskyist opposition vanquished in the Soviet Union of 1930s, Stalinism concocted an "Anti-Soviet Trotskyist Centre" that was held responsible for sabotage of industry, scapegoated for the failures of bureaucratic planning and inept management of the economy. See Rogovin, *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror*, 263–275.

64 Some of these, of course, had once been Party members, but had withdrawn in disgust with the Lovestone leadership, only to rekindle their communist commitment as Cannon raised the banner of Trotskyism. See "A Pittsburg Worker," *The Militant*, 1–15 May 1929.

“experts, prodigies, the Townsend Harris boys of the revolutionary movement, able to quote the line and page in Lenin or Marx that justified the Trotskyist view of the world.”⁶⁵

6 Cannon: Caretaker of the Original Left Opposition Cadre

Cannon’s importance in recruiting the original leadership cadre of the American Left Opposition was in part a consequence of the high regard in which he was held by segments of his Workers (Communist) Party faction. Among some leading youth figures, in certain labor defense circles, and within a layer of older proletarian militants, Cannon was a Party leader who was widely respected. Such seasoned Party elements trusted Cannon’s judgment. He represented for them a leader who had proven himself in a variety of ways: in the historical development of the revolutionary left that culminated in the formation of the Workers’ Party in 1921; within the International Labor Defense organization; and as a participant in the class struggle mobilizations and factional contests that loomed large within the communist movement over the course of the 1920s. To Cannon’s closest and most intimate factional allies within the Workers (Communist) Party, he represented the *continuity* of the American revolutionary left, and this was something they valued highly.

Confirmation of this esteem came with virtually every Cannon speech. “Did you read Jim’s Plenum speech?” Minnesota youth leader Carl Cowl wrote to his Chicago counterpart, Albert Glotzer. “Isn’t it a beauty? To have said in such a

65 Jacobs, *Is Curly Jewish?* 30–31. As Jacobs’ comment suggests, communist youth might in particular be drawn to the Left Opposition. The *Daily Worker* would later note the significance of a “large section of the former leadership of the [Young Workers Communist] League” being won over to Trotskyism. Among the leaders and recent former leaders of the YWL who were recruited to the Left Opposition, the *Daily Worker* cited Abern, Carlson, Borgeson, Mass, Angelo, Shachtman, Glotzer and Allard, and to this list could be added Cowl and Morgenstern, among others. See “Forward to Mass Communist Youth League,” *Daily Worker*, 5 April 1929. Reference to Townsend Harris boys was a New York-specific identification. Townsend Harris was an advocate of free public education and a preparatory high school in Queen’s was named in his honor, admitting the brightest male students in New York, many of whom came from poor, immigrant families. Townsend Harris High School had a reputation for rigorous academic training, and its graduates often went on to university training at New York’s City College, where tuition was free. Known as “bright boys,” graduates of Townsend Harris excelled on the yearly Regents examinations and combined intellectual smarts, incisive wit, and demonstrative incapacity in all things athletic. See Eileen F. Lewbow, *The Bright Boys: A History of Townsend Harris High School* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000).

masterly style what has been on all of our chests, and to clearly characterize and dispose of the leadership of [the] Pepper[s], Lovestones, Wolfes, Devines, Olgins, Trachtenbergs, Kruses and the like, we owe him the gratitude that wells from any revolutionary heart for a blow well delivered to the jaw of reaction." As Shachtman later noted, the Left Opposition in the United States came into being "thanks primarily to the fact that Trotsky's views were sponsored by a party leader who enjoyed the prestige and authority that Cannon had" in the eyes of a small cohort of committed communists.⁶⁶

Cannon's embrace of Trotskyism was, to be sure, long in the making. Indeed, it took so long to develop that, when it was initially put on private display for a select few after his return from the Sixth Congress, and when it first went public in late October 1928, it shocked almost everyone. "The entire Communist Party was astounded, not to say stupefied and incredulous," Shachtman later wrote, "at hearing that Cannon had come forward as a supporter of the Russian Opposition." Glotzer would insist that the Cannon faction had *never* discussed "the question of Trotsky" and Cannon had not "voiced any important or decisive opinion about the fight of the Russian Opposition."⁶⁷ Not understanding what was at stake in the controversy over Trotsky, Cannon put the matter aside and stayed silent. Too embroiled in what he later came to understand had been the local, Workers (Communist) Party national fight to spend much time thinking in larger terms, Cannon and some around him were nonetheless ground being tilled in ways that would eventually make them receptive to the seed of Trotskyism. "We were one of the latest detachments of the International Communist Opposition to take definite shape in the open," Cannon conceded in 1930. As he further noted, however, "We were prepared 'by the past' for our place under the banner of the International Left Opposition."⁶⁸

By this Cannon meant that he and a handful of others had experienced first-hand, at the highest levels of the Workers (Communist) Party, the stalemate of Stalinization, although they would not, in the midst of their Party travails, have

66 Shachtman, "25 Years of American Trotskyism," 17–18. For a detailed recollection of how Cannon was highly regarded by young members of his faction see Albert Glotzer, "Reminiscences of James P. Cannon," Box 2, File 14, "Unpublished Reminiscences," JPC Papers; Cowl to Glotzer, 2 January 1929, Box 1, "Breitman File," Carl Cowl Papers, Tamiment Institute, Bobst Library, New York University, New York, New York [uncatalogued]. Note as well, "To the YWL Convention: A Statement of the Expelled Communist Youth," *The Militant*, 15 April 1929, signed by 33 expelled YWL members.

67 Shachtman, "25 Years of American Trotskyism," 14; Albert Glotzer, "Reminiscences of JPC," Unpublished typescript, Box 2, File 14, JPC Papers.

68 James P. Cannon, "Character and Limits of Our Faction: Lessons from Recent International Experiences of the Opposition," *The Militant*, 15 May 1930.

named their problems in this way. Nonetheless, Cannon and his co-workers were slowly being educated in a set of pragmatic discontents and disbeliefs that could open out into a wider, more abstract questioning of the ways in which the Communist International had abandoned fundamental principles. Trapped in the maze of factional intrigue that, by 1928, immobilized the Workers (Communist) Party and severely constrained the work that could be done in potentially critically important sections such as the International Labor Defense, Cannon had a great deal of trouble seeing the forest of Stalinization through the trees of the American Party's troubles. In conjunction with those who rallied around his standard in the communist movement of the 1920s, Cannon was often confounded by a dizzying, often dazzling, pyrotechnics of programmatic turns that overwhelmed the politics of principle in an avalanche of theses and counter-theses, often associated with "the Comintern man," John Pepper. The Cannon group recoiled in disbelief at the descent into the endless jockeying for power that carried with it the most unsavory willingness to maneuver and manipulate, something that, by late 1927, was associated most odiously with the Party leadership of Jay Lovestone, but that affected all groups and leaders. This included Jim Cannon, who acknowledged that he had become "a first-class factional hoodlum." Once a champion of the Russian revolutionary leadership, whose early advice to the United States movement helped to take American communism out of the underground and into positions where it could influence and interact with the struggles of the working class, Cannon changed course. He concluded that Moscow's input was now sadly restricted to manipulating and controlling a Party of subordinates. Cannon despaired that much could be done. Then, at the Sixth Congress, his eyes were opened by reading Trotsky's powerful words of critique.⁶⁹

They appeared to Cannon like a "searchlight in the fog of official propaganda, scholasticism, and administrative decree," restoring "the best traditions and standards of Marxist and Leninist thought." Cannon's past, ordered by his burning desire to do what he could to make the American Revolution, prepared him

69 For a full account of Cannon's history in the Workers (Communist) Party of the 1920s, one that can be read as preparing him for Trotskyism, see Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*. I thus reject Shachtman's position, which was posed with a later factional purpose, that Cannon's 1928 decision to embrace Trotskyism came "out of the clear blue" and was "a lucky accident." See Shachtman, "25 Years of American Trotskyism," 17. Cannon responded to such allegations in "The Degeneration of the Communist Party and the New Beginning," *Fourth International*, 15 (Fall 1954), 121–127. On Cannon's self-assessment see James P. Cannon, "The Problem of Party Leadership," in Cannon, *Writings and Speeches, 1940–1943: The Socialist Workers Party in World War II* (New York: Pathfinder, 1975), 371–374.

to see in Trotsky's indictment a way out of the impasse he was experiencing in the Workers (Communist) Party's Stalinization. Almost three decades later he told Theodore Draper, "It was the document that hit us like a thunderbolt. It just knocked us completely over."⁷⁰

By the time Cannon returned to New York from the 1928 World Congress, this "thunderbolt" document smuggled out of the Soviet Union, he was committed to take the fight on behalf of the Russian Opposition and the regeneration of United States communism into the open. Having access to Trotsky's writings was now fundamental to Cannon's development as a revolutionary, and over the course of the late 1920s and early 1930s he made a political leap, eventually moving beyond not only his past understanding of factional leadership but his actual grasp of politics. Schooled in the Comintern's discourse of staking out positions in documents of rhetorical obfuscation, in which verbose hedging and qualifications were a required insurance against arbitrary shifts in the substance of specific political stands, Cannon learned afresh from Trotsky the value of articulating clearly fundamental principles. Years later Cannon would tell Harry Ring, "As we began to get the writings of Trotsky, it opened up a whole new world for us. ... [T]here were a lot of things I didn't know. ... I was beginning to learn from Trotsky."⁷¹

Discussions with comrades who were also being re-educated in revolutionary politics by Trotsky contributed to Cannon's development. Conversations with Spector in Moscow were critically important in bringing Cannon to his new understanding of what must be done. But to accomplish anything, he needed support. He turned initially, understandably, to Rose Karsner, who was Cannon's first, and never faltering, "firm adherent." For Rose, reading the poorly translated copy of sections of Trotsky's "Draft Program," was as if "at last light [had] been thrown on the manner in which the Comintern had been treating the American Section. We had never known what was happening or why. The mystery was cleared up." Because the document would take time to transcribe and reproduce by hand, Cannon and Karsner were restricted to showing it to select and trusted comrades in their apartment, not letting their lone copy out of sight, keeping it well hidden in a back room. Shachtman and Abern, Cannon's closest and longest-standing factional allies in the Party, read Trotsky's criticisms of the Communist International. "I will never want, or be able, to forget the absolutely shattering effect upon my inexcusable indifference to

⁷⁰ See Cannon's introduction to L.D. Trotsky, *The Draft Program of the Communist International: A Criticism of Fundamentals* (New York: Militant, 1929), vi; Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 374.

⁷¹ Ring interview, 13 February 1974, 16.

the fight in the Russian party by the first reading of Trotsky's classic *Critique of the Draft Program of the Comintern*," Shachtman later wrote. Reading the document, in Shachtman's words, was an explosive experience, "lighting new horizons ... and pointing out new roads to tread." Within two or three days, Cannon, Karsner, Shachtman, and Abern "had made a solid agreement to start the fight together." Soon thereafter they enlisted the popular *Daily Worker* columnist, Tom O'Flaherty, brother of the famous Irish novelist, Liam. A long-time Cannon supporter and drinking buddy, O'Flaherty divided his time between New York, where he lived a couple of blocks from Rose and Jim, and Plentywood, Montana, his time in the west occupied with editing a labor paper and a small satirical magazine called *The Wasp*.⁷²

Cannon and his "Generals" almost certainly tried to copy the Trotsky document so it could be circulated outside of New York, but they lacked the means: "we didn't have a stenographer; we didn't have a typewriter; we didn't have a mimeograph machine; and we didn't have any money." Cannon was beginning to miss his swivel chair. He wrote, tongue-in-cheek, to Albert Glotzer in early November 1928. "We made the error of failing to convert a comrade stenographer to our cause so we, who once had only to put our feet up on the desk and say, with an air of importance, 'take a letter please', must now type our own, with the two educated fingers we have." Abern tripped up in the clandestine context of early October 1928, trying to secure a cost estimate from a public stenographer who had ties to the Foster group. She innocently let it be known in Party circles that someone had approached her to work on "some kind of an article by Trotsky."⁷³ This helped precipitate the October interrogations, and it meant that Cannon had no time to properly contact and distribute documentation to potential allies in distant cities.

72 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 52; Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 221; Shachtman, "25 Years of American Trotskyism," 16; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 152–156; Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 37; Evelyn Reed, "Rose Karsner Cannon is Dead, A Foremost Woman Trotskyist," *The Militant*, 18 March 1968; Evelyn Reed, Typescript, "Rose Interview," Reel 61, Rose Karsner Cannon Papers, in JPC Papers; Executive Secretary to T.J. O'Flaherty, 23 November 1928, Reel 9, Russian Center, PRL; "T.J. O'Flaherty for the Opposition," *The Militant*, 15 December 1928; Roskolenko, *When I Was Last On Cherry Street*, 112–113; and on Plentywood, Verlaine Stoner McDonald, *Red Corner: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Northeastern Montana* (Helena: Montana Historical Society, 2010). Rose Karsner, for a variety of reasons, including her illness at the time of the original expulsions, was not highly visible in the first stages of Left Opposition activity, and she was not expelled until April – May 1928. See "The Expelled," *The Militant*, 1–15 May 1929.

73 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 52; Glotzer, "Reminiscences of JPC"; Minutes of the Political Committee of the CEC, 18 October 1928, Second Session, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL.

Albert Glotzer and Arne Swabeck, hearing rumors of Cannon's Trotskyism in Chicago, but having no word from their group leader, considered the whole matter nothing more than "a Lovestone frameup." When they found out that Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman had come out for the Left Opposition they were dumbfounded, and dreaded the prospect of expulsion. Irritated at Cannon's failure to communicate, they waffled, berating their New York comrades in private correspondence. Cannon, obviously under extreme pressures in New York, placated the precocious Glotzer with apologies, explanations, and documents, which by mid-November included galley proofs of the initial segments of the *Militant*-serialized publication of Trotsky's "Draft," as well as a German translation of Trotsky's full statement to the Sixth Congress. "[D]on't let extraneous or secondary questions disturb you," Cannon said, trying to deflect Glotzer's pique. Instead, the pedagogical Cannon insisted that everything followed from knowing "the *reasons* for a position from all sides." The key was to study what was available of Trotsky's writings, Cannon stressed, closing warmly: "We all send love and we don't mean maybe."

As the Windy City comrades seemed slow to respond, Cannon's impatience showed. He pressed particularly for Swabeck and Glotzer to break definitively from the old Foster-Cannon caucus and "begin a militant fight for your own position and organize a group to support it." However small this new Opposition was to be, it was crucial that there be no compromises and vacillation that would paper over fundamental differences. "The fight is already in the open in New York, Kansas City, Minneapolis, and Philadelphia," Cannon pointed out. "We know that Chicago is a sleepy city, but we hope for news soon that it is waking up." Swabeck and Glotzer eventually read the Trotsky material together, in one sitting, Glotzer's response being exactly the same as others within Cannon's inner circle: "We were profoundly influenced by it. As members of the Cannon faction from the time of its formation at the 1925 convention, our feelings regarding the internal situation in the Party were similar to Cannon's, as was our response to Trotsky's 'Criticism'. Indeed, Trotsky convincingly explained for us what was wrong with the Party, the International, and beyond that, the Russian leadership."

The hapless Hathaway, his mission from Moscow rerouted from New York to Chicago, thought that he could convince Swabeck and Glotzer to stay with the Party by whispering in their ears that Lovestone was definitely on the way out and that a new regime would welcome them to power. Cannon had played the wrong Trotskyist card, and Hathaway, occupying an insider's track, appreciated how the Stalinist deck was stacked. Friends in Moscow, he assured the Chicago pair, were what counted, and he had all of their names in his little black book. When it came to discussing what the Comintern had done and

how it became derailed, Hathaway had no convincing arguments. His knowledge “of the theoretical and political questions in dispute between Trotsky and the Stalin leadership was feeble.” Glotzer recalled that, “Hathaway simply couldn’t debate the issues raised by Trotsky’s criticisms.” Cannon, aided by Stalinist incompetence, had two more valuable recruits.

On 22 November 1928 Swabeck and Glotzer issued a statement to the Central Executive Committee, the National Executive Committee, and the Young Workers League protesting the Cannon, Shachtman, Abern expulsions, and a wave of similar subsequent actions that tore the Party asunder elsewhere. Embracing Trotsky’s critique of the Communist International, and calling for a repudiation of the bureaucratic methods and arbitrary decisions of the Lovestone-Pepper leadership of the Workers (Communist) Party, the two Chicago Oppositionists signed themselves “For the Unity of the Party.” They must have understood the irony of their closing, knowing that they would be immediately expelled, along with three other Windy City comrades.⁷⁴

Swabeck and Glotzer, while conditioned to join with Cannon, were both pushed in the direction of the Left Opposition by the wooden and poorly informed Lenin School graduate, Clarence Hathaway, and prodded to act decisively by a persuasive contingent of Minneapolis comrades. Minneapolis was perhaps the strongest center of intuitive support for Cannon. This existed elsewhere, but not in the numbers and staunch resolution of Minneapolis. An old family friend of Cannon’s, A.A. ‘Shorty’ Buehler, whose revolutionary activism reached back to the World War I years, was quick to come out for the Left Opposition in Kansas City and, along with Sam Kassen, was expelled from the

74 The best account of the Cannon-Swabeck-Glotzer relation in this period is the detailed discussion in Glotzer, “Reminiscences of James P. Cannon,” which quotes Cannon-Glotzer correspondence of 31 October 1928; 2 November 1928; and 16 November 1928, the latter letters found in full in Box 3, File 2, JPC Papers. An abridged version of the 16 November 1928 Cannon to Glotzer letter appears as “Tactics in the Chicago CP,” in *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928–31 – The Left Opposition in the U.S.*, 49–51. Cannon considered that Swabeck in this period hesitated and was often making wrong decisions, and correspondence reveals how extensively Cannon urged him to consider questions of tactics “more seriously and fundamentally.” Ring interview, 10 October 1973, 12; Cannon, “Concerning Our Expulsion: A Letter to A Comrade,” *The Militant*, 15 November 1928 (for an earlier and fuller draft of this letter, more personal in its argument, see Cannon to Swabeck, 2 November 1928, Box 11, File 35, Abern Papers); Cannon to Swabeck, no date [December 1928], Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL. Glotzer’s reaction is recounted in *Trotsky: Memoir and Critique*, 23. On the final Swabeck-Glotzer statement and expulsion see “Statement of Arne Swabeck and Albert Glotzer,” 22 November 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; “Swabeck, Glotzer Join the Opposition; Expelled,” *The Militant*, 1 December 1928. See also Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 39–40.

Party in early November 1928. In Philadelphia, support for Cannon was orchestrated by Bernie Morgenstern, a YWL leader who, on hearing of the expulsion of his faction head, immediately made the trek to New York City. Not knowing what the allegations of Trotskyism really meant, he knocked on Cannon's door and asked, "What is the real low-down?" Cannon invited Morgenstern in, dug Trotsky's document out of its hiding place and, after reading the material in one sitting, the Philadelphia "Cannonite" was won over, bringing with him two other YWLeers, Leon Goodman and Sol Lankin. Barney Mass, embedded in the Detroit auto industry and linked to Cannon through old Kansas City and IWW ties, and Ruth Reynolds, editor of the *Dodge Worker*, were similarly recruited because of closeness to Cannon, who urged them to utilize "every opportunity for direct and open agitation for our position." Cannon dismissed as "worthless and worse ... a pussy-footing, half-hearted support for the Opposition position," advising that an "aggressive fight backed by conviction will bring results in Detroit and elsewhere." All such recruitment, however, was of the "singlejack" variety, in which direct contact with sympathizers in ones and twos consolidated converts.

In Minneapolis, the Left Opposition benefited early from what seemed a mass recruitment and Cannon understood well the significance of the breakthrough registered there. "[T]he Minneapolis group is the best all around unit we have," he wrote to Glotzer. "We expect great things to come out of that nucleus. It is, so to speak, an advance edition of what the genuine American communist movement will look like when it gets under way." This Minneapolis vanguard was in direct communication with Glotzer and Swabeck and, in conjunction with Cannon's influence, pushed their identification with the Left Opposition, moving it past the narrow sense of concentrating the Chicago protest against the precipitous process of expelling dissidents. "I wired Glotzer last night on the expulsions," Minneapolis youth leader Carl Cowl wrote to Cannon in mid-November 1928, adding that other comrades were communicating with Swabeck "demanding a sharp fight for our reinstatement ... so altogether we have built a fire under them." He later suggested that, "Indications are that our long range bombardment of the Chicago comrades has taken effect."⁷⁵

75 The above paragraphs draw on A.A. Shorty Buehler to Cannon, 3 December 1929; Cannon to Glotzer, 24 August 1929, Box 3, File 2, JPC Papers; "Wholesale Expulsions from the Party Begin," and "The Expelled," *The Militant*, 1 December 1928; 15 December 1928; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 58, 63; Bernard Morgenstern, Sol Lankin, and Leon Goodman to the District Executive Committee of District #3, Young Workers League [no date]; Barney Mass to Cannon, 17 December 1928, Reel 6, Russian Center, PRL; Typed Excerpts of Letters from Mass to Cannon, 2 November 1928; 30 November 1928; Mass to Cannon,

The Minneapolis group was itself recruited to the Left Opposition less through an original commitment to Trotsky's programmatic criticisms of the Communist International than because of its generalized discontents with the Lovestone regime. It regarded as particularly abhorrent the reckless policy of expelling members who challenged the arbitrary authority of the Central Executive Committee Majority. This was a not uncommon response among stalwart working-class elements of the Communist Party, whose revulsion at the Lovestone, Pepper, Bertram Wolfe, and Max Bedacht leadership had, by late 1928, boiled over. One Philadelphia comrade, for instance, wrote to Cannon of his fidelity to Leninism, but insisted that American communism had been diverted from its proletarian path by "the arrogant shoe-string politicians who at present head (or behead) the Party." Such disgruntled communists rallied to Cannon under the banner, "Down with bureaucracy, up with Communist democracy in the Party."⁷⁶

This, indeed, was originally largely the orientation of the disaffected elements in Minneapolis. They reacted, first and most decisively, against Hathaway's being parachuted into their midst, parroting the stale, mechanical claims that Cannon was "a Trotskyist leading outside the Comintern and into the camp of Social Democracy." Indeed, they saw Hathaway as an interloper who was fanning the flames of factionalism, demanding caucuses with his former Foster-Cannon Minority Opposition in violation of the Communist International's injunction to build party unity. As Hathaway pleaded and threatened leading Party figure, Cannon's contemporary and former Wobbly, Vincent Ray Dunne, the Minneapolis comrades rallied against what they perceived as an attempt at "building a Lovestone No. 2 (Hathaway) group." Things then moved quite quickly. Dunne, Oscar Coover, Carl Skoglund, and O.R. Votaw, all members of the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul) District Executive Committee, were suspended at a 14 November 1928 District Party meeting when they protested against a decision refusing to allow them to address the rank-and-file about the expulsions of Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman. Four days later, at a general membership meeting, resolutions were moved that the suspended Party leaders be permitted to address the body on recent actions of the Central Executive Committee and that they be immediately reinstated, with full rights in the Party. The motion was defeated, and those voting in favor, 18 in number, were immediately expelled. Among them were five rail-

3 December 1928; Cannon to Mass, 4 December 1928; Mass to Shachtman, 6 December 1928; Typed excerpts of letter from Cowl to Cannon, 16 November 1928; and Cowl to Cannon, no date, head "New Mailing Address," all in Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL.

76 A.J. Rose F. Carey (?) to Cannon, 18 January 1929, Box 3 File 2, JPC Papers.

road workers, four factory operatives, two coal heavers, and four tradesmen. Heavy handedness created a Left Opposition almost overnight in Minneapolis, but its members had only begun to inquire into the actual politics of the Russian Opposition. Those expelled declared honestly, "By voting for the resolution against the expulsions we did not vote for or against Trotskyism. ... We declare that we don't know what Trotskyism is. ... [E]xpulsion of so many comrades without justification has a conscious purpose, namely: to throw a scare into the membership who are justly criticizing the leadership and thereby hold in readiness the whip of 'Trotskyism'. Open your mouth and you are a Trotskyite, and out of the Party you go!" Outraged by "terroristic methods," the Left Opposition in Minneapolis began as a protest against bureaucracy, pure and simple. Even as late as mid-March 1929, one of the leading militants expelled, C.R. Hedlund, framed the issue as "the kick in the face we as proletarian workers received from Lovestone, [which] only served to close our jaws that much tighter in the grim determination to rid the revolutionary movement of the working class of self-seekers and cheap politicians of the Lovestone type."⁷⁷

Cannon struggled from a distance, as he was also doing with Glotzer and Swabeck,⁷⁸ to focus the Minneapolis Left Opposition's stand. He wrote to Spector that in Minneapolis there was an initial "problem of extending the struggle from the fight against bureaucratism to the acceptance of the whole platform." For Cannon, Shachtman and Abern, the issue was not so much the overkill of the Minneapolis Party in resorting to wholesale expulsions, as it was the larger political issues at stake. Thus Cannon noted that in the letters to the membership expounding their views, those protesting their expulsion from the Party backed away from "even the suspicion of knowledge of or sympathy for the political ideas of the opposition and intimate that there is no real objec-

77 The fullest discussion of the emergence of the Minneapolis Left Opposition group appears in correspondence pilfered from the Cannon-Karsner apartment. It was circulated by the Lovestone CEC in early January 1928 and included Carl Cowl to Cannon, 16 November 1928; Carl Cowl, "Synopsis of Events in Minneapolis," "Summary of Situation Here Today," "Minutes of a Meeting at Skoglund's, 17 November 1928," and "Meeting, Headquarters, 11/19 Monday Night"; C.R. Hedlund et al., "Statement to the Members of the District #9, from the Expelled Group," no date, all in Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL. See also Ring interview, 10 October 1973, 11–12; "Vincent Dunne," and "The Expelled," *The Militant*, 15 December 1928; and, for the Hedlund quote, C.R. Hedlund, "Letters from the Militants: From a Minnesota 'Renegade,'" *The Militant*, 15 March 1929.

78 As late as the third week in December 1928, Cannon was still pressing Swabeck and Glotzer to mobilize their forces in the Party milieu independently, rather than shield the Left Opposition behind the premise that it was safer "not to expose our elements too much." See Cannon to Glotzer, 20 December 1928, published as "For An Open Policy," in *James P. Cannon, Writings and Speeches, 1928–31 – The Left Opposition in the U.S.*, 76–78.

tion to the expulsion of actual Trotskyists.” Such a stand “limits the protest to a strictly ‘Home Town’ basis, failing to mention our expulsion to say nothing of the expulsion of the Russian Oppositionists.” Stressing the need to “open direct propaganda for our whole program,” and distribution of *The Militant*, which was publishing some of Trotsky’s writings, Cannon pushed the Minneapolis group to enter into a closer examination and wider dissemination of the fundamental ideas that had galvanized the upheaval in the Party.⁷⁹ This they did, and within a short period of time Minneapolis was sustaining the Left Opposition financially, providing funds for the New York center and the movement’s newspaper, *The Militant*.⁸⁰

Cannon would come to value highly his Minneapolis comrades, who would play a role of unrivalled significance in the history of American Trotskyism in the years to come. He perhaps harbored some hopes that with the recruitment of Vincent Ray Dunne there might remain yet a possibility of winning his elder brother, William F. ‘Bill’ Dunne, to the cause of the Left Opposition. Bill Dunne had been Cannon’s closest friend and political ally in the Workers (Communist) Party of the mid-to-late 1920s. Cannon, Dunne, and their partners, Rose and Margaret, shared a Lower East Side apartment. The two men told each other many a tall tale while sharing a cafeteria meal or, their tongues loosened by drink, bantered about Party trade union policy flaws at a back table in McSorleys. With the political separation of Jim Cannon and Bill Dunne in 1928, Cannon lost the comradeship and counsel of the one figure in the revolutionary movement with whom he was closest, sharing a perspective on the importance of trade union questions, and whose personal history in the workers’ movement established Dunne as Cannon’s peer. This loss necessitated Cannon learning to work politically in new ways, and it would not be until Arne Swabeck and Cannon combined forces in New York in the early 1930s that Cannon could rely on a close political relationship with a comrade who was not decidedly his junior in the revolutionary movement.

Comrades being won to the Opposition queried Cannon about whether Dunne might yet come around to join them. This, however, was not to be. At the time of the Sixth Congress in Moscow, Cannon and Dunne did not even see eye-to-eye on a number of things, and Cannon could not convince the indefatigable militant to shift his allegiance from Stalin to Trotsky. As word of the mass expul-

79 Cannon to Spector, 20 December 1928; Cannon to Cowl, no date [December 1928], Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL.

80 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 98; Cowl to Cannon, 10 December 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; “Minneapolis is Leading in the Weekly Drive,” *The Militant*, 15 March 1929.

sions in Minneapolis spread, the Communist Party published a cable from Bill Dunne, on Comintern assignment in the Far East, separating himself from Cannon and his “general policy,” insisting that any attempt to portray Dunne as supporting or sympathizing with Cannon was a “deliberate lie.” Spector commented to Abern that, “judging by his cable [Dunne] is lost to us – for the present anyway. He would have been of considerable help ... but maybe he too will change his mind a little some day.” Cannon assured Spector that the Dunne cable had produced no ill effects in Minneapolis: “We just got a letter from his brother in Minnesota however and the hope that may have been placed in shaking them by this means are in vain. On the contrary, the pressure from Minnesota on Bill will quite possibly produce the opposite effect along with other factors which will develop.” Nine months later, Cannon was still hopeful, writing to Glotzer:

Don't be too quick to make a final judgment of Bill and don't be too harsh. We cannot know what another shake-up will bring. His long association with our group should not be discounted; he was not one of the hangers-on like Hathaway ... serving his own interests. His heart was in our fight and all his conviction was with our main ideas. I am far from holding myself blameless for the estrangement which grew up between us before the break. I would go a long way to make it possible for him to work with us again. The least we can do is to leave the door open and hope.

This was to prove a recruitment pipe dream. Bill Dunne, while eventually making his exit from the Communist Party, never renounced Stalinism and hardened in his regard of Trotskyism as little more than an ultra-left deviation. Decades after their political parting of ways, Cannon still insisted that Dunne had been a “victim of Stalinism,” a tragic figure on whom he could still not comment objectively.⁸¹

81 On the Dunne-Cannon estrangement see, in general, Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 327–328. The above paragraph draws on Minutes of the Political Committee of the Central Executive Committee, 5 December 1928, Reel 2E, Russian Center, PRL; Mass to Cannon, 3 December 1928; Spector to Abern, 10 December 1928; Cannon to Spector, 20 December 1928, all in Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; Cannon to Glotzer, 24 August 1929, Box 3, File 2, JPC Papers; Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism*, 187–188. On Dunne's later views of Trotskyism/Stalinism see William F. Dunne, “Manuscript – History of the Communist Party,” Box 63, Files 1–2, esp. 21–23, William F. Dunne Papers, Tamiment Institute, Bobst Library, New York University, New York, New York; Shipman, *It Had To Be Revolution*, 172.

The failure to draw Bill Dunne into the Left Opposition notwithstanding, the combination of Stalinism pushing a leadership layer of Communist Party and Young Workers League members toward Trotskyism, and Cannon's particular allure further pulling them in that direction, consolidated a small, but significant, corps of soldiers for the developing army of the infamous "Three Generals." In probing the archive of this first pivotal wave of recruitment, Cannon's role in both drawing an important layer of leading cadre toward the Left Opposition and in steeling them in the necessity of extending their understanding of what was at stake in the politics of Trotskyism was paramount. As he had in the founding and early days of the Workers' Party, and as was later recognized by Alexander Bittelman, Cannon's unique political capacity was to convince, charm, and cajole the divergent elements necessary to the building of an effective revolutionary organization, winning them to the commitment to sustain an uphill fight. In 1920–21 this had been difficult enough; in 1928–29, confronting the usual forces arrayed against revolutionary organization in a capitalist society, but also running headlong into the existence of a recognized and long-established Communist Party, the odds were not in favor of the struggle. And yet Cannon, swimming very much against a number of tides, not only managed to stay afloat but to build a ship in which others could sail. It was Cannon, Shachtman later somewhat grudgingly admitted, who "was most persistent throughout the early, difficult years of isolation in imbuing all the serious people with an alertness to the need of a proletarian movement; and on the whole he was likewise the most effective of us all."⁸²

This particular Cannon contribution can be illustrated by comparing what Cannon accomplished in the United States with what Spector achieved in Canada. The two men both had important positions in their respective communist parties, but there, perhaps, the similarities ended. Cannon was a factional and party leader centrally placed within trade union and labor defense circles, while Spector's role in Canada was more limited to editorial, intellectual, and executive committee functions. More comfortable addressing issues of an international and theoretical sort than was Cannon, Spector was also undoubtedly more cognizant of Trotskyism's critical perspectives prior to the Sixth Congress than was his American counterpart. Draper, however, exagger-

82 Bittelman, "Things I Have Learned," 357–359; Shachtman, "25 Years of American Trotskyism," 18. Cannon's correspondence with Glotzer in 1928–29 is illuminating with respect to Cannon's caretaker role, where the older comrade counsels his younger and impatient recruit on a number of issues, urging him to see a series of matters in new and more complex ways. See, for instance, Cannon to Glotzer, 20 February 1929, Box 3, File 2, JPC Papers.

ated when, in 1960, he boldly suggested that, "In the entire Western hemisphere there was at this time only one real Trotskyist – Maurice Spector, a Canadian."⁸³

Once Spector and Cannon embraced Trotskyism, their capacities to build a nucleus of supporters diverged dramatically. To be sure, Cannon's more successful efforts can in part be explained by the differing circumstances prevailing in the United States, all of which tilted in favor of the old Wobbly agitator. He returned to North America more than two weeks before Spector, and those 16 days were centrally important in the timetable of recruitment and preparation for expulsion. The Canadian Party had neither the deep factional history, nor the embittering experience of a Lovestone-Pepper leadership that, in the United States, cultivated a propensity among certain communists to look favorably on an Opposition that both leaned critically to the left and was prepared to break decisively from the methods and political orientation of Party headquarters. Almost immediately upon his return to Toronto in the second week of October, Spector was outed. Following Spector from Moscow was Stewart Smith. Barely out of his teens, Smith was a Lenin School graduate and Clarence Hathaway associate who had been briefed in the Soviet Union of Spector's and Cannon's comings and goings. In a New York stopover en route to Canada, Lovestone filled Smith in on "the whole story of Cannon's defection."⁸⁴ This, then, gave Spector almost no wiggle room of the kind Cannon was able to utilize effectively in New York. Even as he abstained from speaking in Party meetings, or offered only the most guarded of commentaries, Spector was being eyed suspiciously. 'Moscow Jack' MacDonald authored a report on the Sixth Congress that closed with a provocation: "Is there any Trotskyism in the Canadian Party. It would be a funny party that had no Trotskyism in it."⁸⁵

To the extent that a small cohort of younger, but importantly situated, Canadian comrades harbored discontents, Spector was unable to harness them to the program of the Left Opposition. Criticism in Canada remained, according to Spector, fixated on *national* problems as opposed to appreciating *international* developments. Wherever Spector turned, however hesitatingly, he found comrades "mortally afraid of being labeled 'Trotskyists.'" In short, Spector faced the same recruitment barriers that confronted Cannon in the United States, but also ran into some additional difficulties.

83 Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 362. For a fuller, more cautious, commentary on Spector see Palmer, "Maurice Spector, James P. Cannon, and the Origins of Canadian Trotskyism," 91–148.

84 Smith, *Comrades and Komsomolks*, 87, 97, 106–111.

85 Spector to Cannon, 31 October–1 November 1928, Reel 6, Russian Center, PRL.

For all of Spector's strengths, he lacked Cannon's capacities as a caretaker. The less organizationally experienced Canadian Trotskyist apparently mis-handled an ideal opportunity to bring at least some of a dissident group of 40–50 Young Communist League members into the Left Oppositionist fold. Led by Beckie Buhay, Charles Marriot (who expressed interest in knowing what Trotskyism entailed), and Oscar Ryan, this youth contingent was disaffected from the older entrenched leadership of the Canadian Party, especially Tim Buck and Jack MacDonald. A young Leslie Morris, enrolled in the Lenin School in 1928, was also a potential recruit, having cast his lot with Cannon earlier in the 1920s. Like the YCL dissidents, Morris needed to be convinced of the necessity of a factional struggle and the importance of rooting it in something that reached beyond narrow Canadian questions. He was also no doubt influenced by his Moscow training, which probably instilled in Morris a cautiousness about stepping into the Trotskyist breach. Buhay, Marriot, Ryan, and Morris were eventually won back to Buck, and to Stalinism, Spector being unable to make any headway with them. Morris would acknowledge from Moscow in September 1928 that, "The Cannon affair was a bombshell We don't know all the details yet, but the CEC supporters are making capital out of it, naturally, and are looking for 'Trotskyist' deviations among us." He expressed "less and less regard for [Spector] as a Party leader."⁸⁶

Spector seemed largely unaware of potential sympathizers on his doorstep. Fred J. Flatman of Hamilton had to correspond directly with Cannon to secure 15 copies of *The Militant*. Spector's energies were consumed in jousting with the consolidating Stalinist leadership in Toronto. It wasted no time in sending Spector packing. The Toronto inquisition was telescoped into two long 5–6 November 1928 sessions, culminating in the Canadian Oppositionist's tabling of an impressive statement detailing what was wrong with the Communist International. Of all the documents generated by the expulsion of avowed North American Trotskyists in late 1928 and early 1929, Spector's extensive letter was perhaps the most detailed and coherent articulation of the politics of the Left Opposition, locating the movement away from first principles in:

86 Much detail on Spector's inability to recruit youthful Left Oppositionists in Canada, and sources buttressing this failure, can be found in Palmer, "Maurice Spector, James P. Cannon, and the Origins of Canadian Trotskyism," 126–136. These findings are supported somewhat by the Lenin School correspondence of Leslie Morris, often writing under the pseudonym John Porter, kindly shared with me by Kirk Niergarth. See Morris to Joe, 19 July 1928; 24 September 1928; Stewart Smith to Morris, 9 December 1928, File 55, Lenin School, 1928, The Comintern Fonds (Communist International), Fonds 495, Communist Party of Canada, 1921–1943, National Archives, Canada.

the retardation of the World Revolution, the relative stabilization of Capitalism, the defeats in China, Germany, Great Britain, Bulgaria, etc., and the difficulties of socialist construction in the USSR [which] have exercised their telling influence, and have provoked a desire upon the part of certain elements in the RCP to follow the line of lesser resistance, to solve the difficulties, National and International, not by the harder road of hewing to Leninism, but by the apparently easier theory of 'socialism in one country' ... From the economic point of view it is a Utopian mirage for which neither Marx nor Engels nor Lenin are responsible, and the program of the Comintern will never be a completely correct guide to the revolutionary movement unless it breaks from this theory.

Spector was immediately suspended and, five days later, tossed out of the Party he helped to found and build over the course of the 1920s. "The little Lenin School apparatchik Smith" led the attack in the final proceedings, part of his much-proclaimed "aggressive campaign against Trotskyism." Five weeks later Spector was stripped of his ECCI seat. But the New York comrades were still enthusing over Spector's "statement to the Party," which had "been widely and favorably commented on" in the emerging American Left Oppositional ranks. Spector, having made his mark, was nevertheless pretty much on his own: "I stand isolated so far," he reported to Cannon after his 6 November 1928 suspension.⁸⁷

7 Recruitment's Second Phase: Stalinism's Heavy Hand

As in the United States, there were Canadian Party members who reacted adversely to the undemocratic nature of the expulsion of a leading figure in the Communist movement. They balked at Spector's banishment from their

87 Spector's 6 November 1928 letter to the Political Committee appears in full in Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montreal: Vanguard, 1981), 356–362, which contains a still useful account of Spector's break from Stalinism, 201–217. An abridged version of "Spector's Statement to Canadian Party," appeared in *The Militant*, 1 December 1928, and the paper announced Spector's suspension/expulsion in its first issue, "M. Spector Expelled in Canada," 15 November 1928. Note also, Spector to Cannon, 7 November 1928; Cannon to Spector, 20 December 1928; Cannon to Flatman, 20 November 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL, and, for Party comment on Spector and Trotskyism, "The Communist Party of Canada Maintains Ideological Clarity," *The Worker*, 24 November 1928; Stewart Smith, "Demagoguery Versus the Communist Party," *Canadian Labour Monthly*, 2 (January 1929), 10–18.

ranks, and they resented the suppression of the right to discuss issues of great importance. In the Ukrainian section led by Matthew Popovitch, there was little enthusiasm for the public drubbing of Spector, himself of Ukrainian-Jewish background. But in such quarters, according to Spector, the protection of “institutional interests” trumped principle. The retreat into bureaucratic exclusions angered communist militants fighting in the labor movement, who drew a parallel to their own struggles against the trade union tops and the Party’s suppression of dissent. “You bawl about the bureaucracy in the Amalgamated, and want us to fight it to the point of victimization,” yelled one needle trades communist activist, “and you ... expel Spector in Canada and Cannon and his comrades in the United States.”

Communists who publicly voiced such views found that their days in the Party were numbered. At a Friday-night mass membership meeting following Spector’s expulsion, the “Princes of the Church” turned out in force, whipping up the usual anti-Trotskyist lynch atmosphere, and drawing out the affair until 5 o’clock in the morning. Three hundred comrades dwindled to sixty as the marathon meeting, called to ratify Spector’s heave-ho, dragged into the wee hours. Eventually ten of Spector’s former comrades refused to leave their seats when the stand-up vote was recorded. Many others, Spector was told, left early to avoid having to salute and be counted among the loyal. Jim Blugerman, “a Daniel in the Lion’s Den,” attacked “the bureaucratic caucus” and demanded Party democracy, supported in this by a YWL member, Maurice Quarter. In the weeks to come some 30 Canadian Party and YWL members would be expelled. Spector, writing to Cannon of the need not to be “over-sanguine in this fight,” nevertheless ignored his own advice and suggested that in due course a “group of twenty-five to thirty will crystallize itself in Toronto.” It did not come to pass, and many of those forced out of the Party in the immediate aftermath of Spector’s expulsion, incompletely assimilated to the politics of the Left Opposition, either faded out of the political picture or drifted back into the Communist Party, Blugerman and Maurice Quarter’s father among them.⁸⁸

Indeed, the mass expulsions in Toronto that were reported in January – February 1929, mostly targeting Jewish needle trades and cloak-making workers,⁸⁹ were part of what might be considered a second phase of Left Oppos-

88 The above paragraphs draw on Spector to Cannon, 27–28 November 1928; Spector to Cannon, 5 December 1928; Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; Maurice Quarter interview, taped 31 May 1975 [Arnie Mintz], copy in possession of the author [courtesy Ian Angus], and also in Ross Dowson Papers, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa Canada; Palmer, “Maurice Spector, James P. Cannon, and the Origins of Canadian Trotskyism,” 132–141.

89 See especially, “The Expelled,” *The Militant*, 15 January 1929; 1 February 1929.

ition recruitment, in which the harsh response of a threatened Stalinist bureaucracy went quickly and aggressively into overdrive. Anyone of rank within the Party thought to be associated with the Cannon faction was sent a letter from Lovestone's national headquarters demanding that they come clean and place themselves on the record in opposition to the reviled "Trotskyites."⁹⁰ Those who even faltered slightly in the demanded renunciation, claiming they had questions or professing a lack of understanding, were interrogated further and some were summarily dispensed with. Communist-led but ostensibly non-Party organizations, like the International Labor Defense and the Trade Union Educational League, were maneuvered into removing from office any of those associated with the "Opposition led by Trotsky." Formal charges, even reasons for dismissal, were not given, nor were trials ever held.⁹¹

Perhaps the most important, if transitory, recruit to the Left Opposition in this second phase was the mercurial Colorado-based head of the National Miners' Union [NMU], Gerry Allard. Allard had been active in miners' mobilizations against the United Mine Workers of America bureaucracy, headed by John L. Lewis, and he promoted the "Save the Union" campaign in the Illinois coalfields in 1926–27. Never a convinced advocate of the policies of the Left Opposition, Allard was, like many working-class elements in the Party, vehement in his antagonism to Lovestone. He was quick to protest the expulsion of Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman which, from the perspective of a dissident in the miners' movement, he likened to the hideous actions of the "Lewis machine." Yet Allard regarded Trotskyism with deep suspicion. He wrote to the Communist Party in December 1928 that the unity of the Russian Communist Party was absolutely necessary and that the program of the Left Opposition, aside from engaging "the peasantry and workers into an inevitable war," retarded "the progress of the Soviet Union, throwing into jeopardy the results of the victorious Revolution." In addition, Allard attacked the Cannon group's history in the Workers (Communist) Party as politically unstable, tending toward both opportunism and adventurism. His own criticisms of the Lovestone leadership betrayed a hint of populist anti-semitism, protesting that "the country over, New York or eastern comrades are at leading capacities," and the YWL was

90 Mass to Cannon, 21 November 1928; Alfred E. Goetz to Lovestone, 19 November 1928; T. Radwanski to the Polbureau, 21 November 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; Executive Secretary to Tom O'Flaherty, 23 November 1928; Executive Secretary to William F. Dunne, 26 November 1928; William Mollenhauer to Lovestone, 20 November 1928; Philip A. Raymond to Lovestone, 22 November 1928, Reel 9, Russian Center, PRL.

91 "The Splitters at Work: The ILD and the TUEL," *The Militant*, 15 April 1929.

little more than a “New York Jewish institution.” Allard, for all of his capacities as a workers’ leader, obviously harbored a few skeletons in his closet of proletarian militancy. He was, for better or worse, stampeded into the Left Opposition by Stalinist stricture, expelled in January 1929. Disgusted by the actions of Lovestone, and particularly repulsed by the shamelessness of a Party leadership that would “readily admit openly in public their robbing of Cannon’s apartment,” Allard broke decisively from “the present bunch of fruit merchants, shoe-string salesmen, and bourgeois-styled politicians who have the almost unconditional support of the C.I.” Out of the Communist Party and into the Left Opposition, somewhat by default, Allard never quite managed to assimilate the importance of Trotskyism’s fundamental ideas.⁹²

Others, such as the Jewish furriers’ union and *Freiheit* contributor, Max Waldman, or Springfield, Illinois NMU leader, George Voyzey, came to the Left Opposition, like Allard, via expulsion and in spite of their lack of agreement “with everything the opposition stands for.” Cannon pressed Swabeck, for instance, to meet with Voyzey, Joseph Angelo, and other communist mine leaders in Illinois who had expressed outrage at the expulsions and ongoing gangsterism and convince them to sign “an open declaration.” The Springfield Workers (Communist) Party Mine Nucleus unanimously endorsed a January 1929 letter of protest to the Party, in which the Lovestone regime’s methods of expulsion, suspension, and factional bureaucratic “control of the worst sort” were opposed. Yet this stand was taken by denying the relevance of Trotskyism, which the miner militants claimed not to understand, and which they regarded as “purely a smokescreen used to eliminate certain opponents.” As always, Cannon insisted that, “There is only one way to fight for our platform and that is for everyone who supports it to openly declare his attitude and propagate it militantly. ... The spectacle of class-struggle fighters of this type being terrorized and bulldozed by a clique of gutless college boys who never smelled powder yet on the labor battle field is a spectacle too pitiful to see.” In the midst of the anti-Hungarian group violence of April 1929, Cannon held out great hopes that the combination of Stalinist hooliganism and his own longstanding relations would bring a “good-sized group of IWWs,” who were uniting with the dissid-

92 See, especially, “From a Young Coal Miner,” *The Militant*, 15 December 1928; “An Expelled Miner,” and “The Expelled,” *The Militant*, 1 February 1929; Allard to Cannon, 15 November 1928; Cannon to Allard, 30 November 1928; Allard, “Statement by Gerry Allard on Letter to Cannon Reprinted and My Attitude on Factional Situation of Party and League,” 21 December 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL. For Allard’s troubled history in the Left Opposition see *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928–31 – The Left Opposition in the US*, esp. 290, 308, 320–322.

ent communists and giving up their anti-political syndicalist inclinations, into formal affiliation with the Left Opposition.⁹³

George Breitman compiled a list of 154 Communist Party members in the United States and Canada expelled during the anti-Trotskyist purges of 1928. If we separate out the original, leading cadre recruited directly by Cannon, a good many of these individuals found their way to the Left Opposition on their own accord. Many others never formally embraced Trotskyism or, as was the case with the fur worker and early Cannon recruit, Maurice L. Malkin, wavered under pressures, vacillated, and then repudiated the principles of the Left Opposition. In Cleveland, for instance, it appears that a group of eleven dissidents headed by District Bureau and Secretariat member, Elmer Boich, and composed largely of Slavic factory and stockyard workers, was expelled in late October or early November 1929, almost entirely because of discontents around bureaucracy and corruption. Heavy handling by the Majority on the District Political Committee had been preceded by the expulsion of another comrade, kicked out for "no other reason but his sympathy with Trotsky." For groups such as these, Cannon and *The Militant* became a new political pole around which to rally, and Boich wrote to the New York offices that he wanted to have a comrade from the Left Opposition come to Cleveland and address his group. In the end only Boich and a former member of the Agit-Prop Department of the Cleveland District Executive Committee joined with Cannon.⁹⁴

93 Waldman to Cannon, 11 December 1928; Cannon to Swabeck, no date [20 December 1928], Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; Roy Jones et al to Party, 13 January 1929, Reel 20, JPC Papers; "New Expulsions," *The Militant*, 1 March 1929 and 15 March 1929. Preceding Waldman's recruitment was "A dozen or more individual comrades in New York, mostly Left Needle Trades Workers." See Cannon to Spector, 5 November 1928, Reel 6, Russian Center, PRL. On rww recruitment see Cannon to Glotzer, 20 April 1929, Box 3, File 2, JPC Papers.

94 George Breitman, "Names of the Expelled and Suspended, October 1928–May 1929, in *The Militant*," Typescript, Box 1, "Breitman File," Carl Cowl Papers, Tamiment Institute, Bobst Library, New York University, New York, New York [uncatalogued]; "The Expelled," and "The Cleveland Expulsions," *The Militant*, 15 December 1928; "Activity in Cleveland," *The Militant*, 15 March 1929. Malkin was apparently coerced by the Communist Party while in prison, a threat made that union financial support for his elderly parents would be withdrawn if he did not repudiate the Left Opposition. This prompted contradictory letters from Malkin to both the *Daily Worker* and the Left Opposition in September 1929. For material on the 'Malkin Matter' see Minutes of Meeting of National Committee, Communist League of America, 24 September 1929; 21 & 28 October 1929; 11 November 1929; 18 November 1929, Box 35, Folder 3, GB Papers; "Malkin's 'Statement,'" *The Militant*, 1 October 1929; "Maurice Malkin Stands with the Opposition!" *The Militant*, 1 September 1930; "On Maurice Malkin," *The Militant*, 1 October 1930; "Will Release Comrade Malkin December 30," *The Militant*, 1 December 1930. On Malkin's final expulsion see "M. Malkin Expelled from Opposition," *The Militant*, 1 June 1931. Cannon would later write of Malkin's "slide

It took little more than wires from Chicago's leading Oppositionists, YWLER Albert Glotzer and District Organizer Arne Swabeck, to unleash a St. Louis campaign of disorganizing. "[T]he recent League membership campaign" was converted into an "expulsion campaign," and a "wrecking crew" of paid Party functionaries was "running pell-mell about town trying to 'save' the membership from becoming acquainted with an understanding of the entire 'Trotsky question.'" The result was a grinding halt in the mass work of the Party: north and south side YWLS were disrupted; the Open Youth Forum withered; anti-war campaigns sputtered; and Communist initiatives in the city election were scuttled when the Party candidate embraced Trotskyism. Six expulsions ensued; all became Left Oppositionists.⁹⁵ In this way, Stalinism organized its Trotskyist opponents.

8 'An Army of a Million People': Hungarians, Italians, Finns, and Immigrant Birth Controllers

The third and final recruitment stream that fed into the small torrent of Trotskyism that so distressed the Communist Party involved groups of dissidents that shared enough with Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman to align with them almost immediately. These recruits came as clusters of Party members or former members, whose discontents were submerged in local or language-section contexts that insulated them somewhat from Cannon and his closest allies. Again, the tenacity and resolve of this layer of recruits was uneven and not always to be compared with the leading cadre that Cannon so often recruited directly, but as the small and fragile Left Opposition ranks swelled with the infusion of eight comrades here and fifteen new members there, it seemed a veritable windfall to the struggling Trotskyist movement.

Well before Cannon came across the influential Trotskyist criticism of the Communist International at the Sixth Congress, there were small, subterranean currents of Trotskyism struggling to cohere in the United States. The most advanced of these was a dedicated group, formerly affiliated with the Party's Hungarian section, that established ties to perhaps the most consciously Trotskyist figure in the United States, the Russian Eleazer B. Solnsteve, an employee

down to treachery." See Cannon to Dunne, 21 April 1932, published as "The Degeneration of the Old Guard," in Fred Stanton and Michael Taber, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932-34: The Communist League of America, 1932-1934* (New York: 1985), 87, 400.

95 "New Expulsions," and "The 'Organizers' Who Disorganize," *The Militant*, 15 March 1929; "The Work in St. Louis," *The Militant*, 1 April 1929.

of the official New York-based Soviet trade corporation, Amtorg. Solnstev smuggled crucial pre-Sixth Congress Trotsky documents out of the Soviet Union, and developed ties to the expelled dissident and Trotsky admirer, Ludwig Lore, the Boston revolutionary and birth control advocate, Dr. Antoinette Konikow, and to Trotsky's literary friend and advocate, Max Eastman, and his Russian wife, Eliena. A committed revolutionary and dedicated supporter of the Russian Opposition, Solnstev could not quite weave together an organizational cloth out of this pseudo-Trotskyist fabric, loosely composed as it was of highly diverse and individualistic strands. Solnstev would return to the Soviet Union, suffering victimization at the hands of the Stalin regime, and eventually pay for his political principles with his life. Two outcomes of the courageous Left Oppositionist's efforts would ultimately advance the cause of Trotskyism in the United States. First, through meetings that took place in Lore's New York apartment, Eastman drew on documents in his own collection as well as significant contributions provided by Solnstev and molded the speeches, articles, and letters into *The Real Situation in Russia*. Published in June 1928 by Harcourt & Brace, the book appeared at the same time as Trotsky's criticisms of the Communist International were surfacing in Moscow at the Comintern's World Congress. Second, Solnstev and Amtorg proved something of a magnet. They drew to them a nest of Hungarians Lovestone expelled from the Party in an early purge of irksome elements in the foreign language sections, which lacked the protection of a factional padrone tied to the Foster-Cannon Minority.⁹⁶

The expelled Hungarians, numbering about fifteen, quickly became "convinced Trotskyists." They apparently put out 36 issues of a weekly bulletin, *Proletar*, basing it "on the Platform of the Russian Opposition." Isolated and scorned by most of the Hungarian communists aligned with Lovestone, this small body had almost no contact with other revolutionary oppositionists until it became common knowledge in mid-November 1928 that Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman were embracing Trotsky's views. Led by the Basky brothers, Louis and Frank, and their near-octogenarian father, Lucas, the Hungarian Left Oppositionists immediately made common cause with Cannon. Within weeks they were cultivating sympathizing contacts within the Workers (Communist) Party, trying to extend the reach of the Opposition into Hungarian circles in Chicago and Detroit. Emboldened by awareness of Cannon and others now

96 On Solnstev, Amtorg, Eastman and incipient Trotskyism in 1927–28 see Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 331–332; Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 113–114; Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 368–369; Max Eastman, *Love and Revolution: My Journey Through an Epoch* (New York: Random House, 1964), 510–515.

standing publicly in favor of the Russian Opposition, the Hungarians were strengthened in their resolve to “come together with the American opposition sympathizers,” prepared to “expose themselves” and “fight for the opposition.” Cannon was bolstered by their willingness to suspend their own publication in order to concentrate their energies in helping the larger, and growing, Left Opposition. “They didn’t know about us and we didn’t know about them until they ... saw the first copy of *The Militant*,” Cannon recalled in 1973. “It was quite a relief to go down to the Hungarian Hall and find that we had 10 or 15 comrades all ready to go.” As Cannon noted in his *History of American Trotskyism*, “They certainly looked like an army of a million people to us.”⁹⁷

The Hungarians may not have been that, but their importance to the early American Left Opposition cannot be underestimated. Indeed, Cannon reported to Spector that, “Since the Hungarians have connections in many cities, we will be able by combining with them the connections which we establish to create the skeleton of a supporting movement in many cities in the first stage of the fight.” Lucas Basky was a veteran revolutionist whose political origins lay in the European movement of the nineteenth century, and his sons provided both intellectual and courageous leadership in the first testing months of Trotskyism’s travails. Hungarians were crucial in the formation of the Workers Self Defense Guard in New York, and Frank Basky often served on the front lines, protecting the right of Cannon and others to speak freely about the Left Opposition’s critique of the Communist International. He departed at least one February 1929 Cannon talk bloodied and bruised after doing battle with the Stalinists. Louis Basky was a veteran of the Hungarian Revolution of 1919, emigrating to the United States in the 1920s, where he was a leading figure in the Workers (Communist) Party’s Hungarian section. As an early advocate of the Russian Opposition, he was of considerable value in adding theoretical substance to Cannon’s developing forces, and often led educational meetings, taking the small Hungarian Opposition through the paces of Trotsky’s ideas, leading his comrades in discussions around articles in *The Militant*. But it was arguably the Hungarian women who added most to the Left Oppositionist mix, for the earliest stages of recruitment to Cannon’s “army” were very skewed in terms of gender balance. Only a handful of women were expelled from the Workers (Communist) Party, and the Hungarian recruitment brought a much needed corrective to the Left Opposition’s overly masculine makeup. Two Hungarian women, for instance, were active in the sales of *The Militant* outside of the

97 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 56; Maria Penyaska to Dear Comrades, 22 November 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; Cannon to Spector, 5 November 1928, Reel 6, Russian Center, PRL; Ring interview, 24 October 1973.

Party's Union Square Workers' Center, and attacks on them undoubtedly outraged many, inside and outside the Workers (Communist) Party. One of these women, Pauline Gutringer, was particularly effective in mocking her Stalinist attackers. She chastised their fear of confronting ideas, refusing to cringe at being called a prostitute, and shaming communists who would rely on police to do their political bidding: "Suppose we were prostitutes as you say, we are only two women, armed with no other weapons but a few newspapers under our arms. What fear must possess your minds that you are so terror-stricken at the sight of *The Militant*? We are going home now, not out of any fear but because we do not want to see you disgracing yourself by having us arrested."⁹⁸

It was almost certainly the Hungarian women, working with Rose Karsner, who spearheaded the ticket sales for a benefit performance of Upton Sinclair's "Singing Jailbirds" at the MacDougal Street Provincetown Playhouse on the evening of 18 December 1928, the proceeds going to *The Militant*. When a January 1929 Saturday evening "Cabaret and Dance" was organized, featuring the Proletarian Dramatic Club and benefiting the organs of the Communist Opposition, *The Militant* and *The Proletar*, it took place at the upper East Side Hungarian Hall.⁹⁹ The Hungarians who joined with Cannon in the American Left Opposition expanded the reach of Trotskyism in the United States significantly, both quantitatively and qualitatively. As Cannon told Draper, "The Hungarian comrades were a great comfort and strength to us in the difficult and stormy pioneer days of our movement under the Trotskyist banner."¹⁰⁰

From other ethnic foreign-language sections the American Left Opposition also seemed poised to gain recruits, but nothing like the Basky-developed Trotskyism of the Hungarian group existed or managed to emerge. A small cluster

98 On Louis Basky see Prometheus Research Library, *Dog Days: James P. Cannon vs. Max Shachtman in the Communist League of America, 1931–1933* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 2002), 11, 654–655. See, as one example only of the revulsion on the attacks on the women, "A Revolutionist Against Gangsterism," *The Militant*, 15 January 1929. Gutringer recounts her response to the attack in "The Affair on Union Square," *The Militant*, 1 January 1929. Brief Gutringer obituaries appear under the title "Pauline Gutringer," in *Young Spartacus*, January 1933; and *The Militant*, 21 January 1933. As one of her last acts, Gutringer wrote to her comrades at *The Militant*, sending the Left Opposition \$50. Obviously on her death bed, she stated that she had "lived as a Marxist and I die like a Marxist," adding, "Whatever my relatives do with my dead body I am not responsible for it." See Gutringer to Comrades, 14 November 1932, Reel 20, JPC Papers.

99 Maria Penyaska to Rose Cannon, no date [December 1928], Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; Cannon to Spector, 5 November 1928, Reel 6, Russian Center, PRL; "Benefit Performance for The Militant of 'Singing Jailbirds,'" *The Militant*, 15 December 1928; "Cabaret and Dance," *The Militant*, 15 January 1929.

100 Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 181.

of Oppositional-leaning Italians, led by Anthony Refugee/Ribarich and concentrated in Harlem, was expelled by the Bureau Nazionale Frazione Italiana of the Workers (Communist) Party in early November 1928. Eight in number, including a woman active in the Left Wing of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, this body promised the Left Opposition much, and worked with Cannon and others for a time. Refugee/Ribarich was early identified as “connected with the Cannon opposition,” and it was alleged that, “he has been the main organizer of the Trotskyist group within the Italian Fraction.” He supposedly made public statements confirming his adherence to the positions of the Left Opposition, and was known to have useful connections to Italian-American revolutionaries outside of New York. But as Cannon would come to appreciate after a brief period of time, the Refugee/Ribarich circle were “followers of [Amadeo] Bordiga, not really Trotskyists,” and they never completely assimilated into the ranks of the Trotskyist Opposition. Bordiga, a leader of Italian communism, had been something of an ultra-left thorn in the side of the Comintern throughout the 1920s, and by 1925 was being compared to Trotsky. With the seeming consolidation of the International Left Opposition at the end of the 1920s, Trotsky and Bordiga came briefly together. By the early 1930s, however, it was evident that Bordiga’s sectarian penchant for isolating himself and his oppositional current from other like-minded international elements was drawing a line of separation between himself and Trotsky. The Italian-American Bordiga circle thus drifted away from Cannon and the American Left Opposition.¹⁰¹

Perhaps most disappointing was the failure of the Left Opposition to garner much in the way of recruitment from the numerically powerful Finnish section of the Communist Party. Certainly there was optimism that some Finns would come the way of Cannon. “How are the Finns shaping up on your side of the line?” Spector queried Cannon. There were Cannon sympathizers among the Finns, and eleven members of the Brooklyn Finnish Workers Club were hauled before a Political Committee inquisition on 2 November 1928, five of them charged with “entertaining Trotskyist views and endeavoring to organize

101 Secretary of the Bureau Nazionale Frazione Italiana to Ben Gitlow, 7 November 1928, Reel 9, Russian Center, PRL; Cannon to Spector, 5 November, Reel 6, Russian Center, PRL; Cannon to Spector, 1 December 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; “The Expelled,” *The Militant*, 1 January 1929; Giovanni Pippan to Dear Refugee, 19 December 1928, *The Militant*, 15 January 1929; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 56; “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 170–175; Bordiga led an Italian ultra-leftist split from Trotsky in the 1930–32 period, the break occasioned by a “communist abstentionist” approach to electoral activity. On Bordiga see E.H. Carr, *Twilight of the Comintern, 1930–1935* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 240–244; Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985*, 586–587.

a Trotskyist faction." Cannon reported to Spector on 20 December 1928 that, under the leadership of Elis Sulkanen, the New York Finns were "in open revolt," but that the break was not being made in politically decisive ways. Rather, "The split occurred there over internal issues of the Finnish movement and the control of the Workers Clubs, but they are gradually introducing the platform of the Opposition." In the end, Sulkanen's Finnish group did not gravitate to Trotskyism and, in the sparring that unfolded in the Political Committee hearings, it was clear that what was at issue was less a break from Stalinism than animosity toward the Lovestone leadership. This alone never translated into a wider mobilization. Cannon, weighing the possibilities that might come out of the foreign-language sections, was of the view that, "The Finnish bureaucrats ... are all sitting tight and keeping still, waiting to see which move will best conserve their institutions and interests." Carl Cowl confirmed this assessment from Minneapolis, noting bluntly: "the Finns are bulldozed too easily by the threat of losing their sinecures."¹⁰²

Of all the groups that came to the American Left Opposition because of a disposition to embrace Trotskyism that predated the Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman expulsion and propagandizing, one of the most formidable was associated with the Boston doctor and birth control advocate, Antoinette Konikow.¹⁰³ A fearless woman whose militant socialism extended into Boston's immigrant working-class neighborhoods through her impassioned insistence on women's right to birth control information, Konikow's history in the American revolutionary left reached back to the 1890s. With her fluency in languages (she spoke five), her capacity to both work effectively among a variety of ethnic groups and to keep abreast of revolutionary developments in Russia and Europe was enhanced considerably. She traveled to the Soviet Union on a trip she funded herself, experiencing first-hand a profound disillusionment with the bureaucratized Stalinist regime. It did not shake her commitment to either the Russian Revolution or the possibilities of revolutionary breakthroughs elsewhere. If largely unknown to Cannon in October 1928, Konikow was obviously targeted by the Lovestone leadership, which summoned her from Boston to attend a New York hearing that would address allegations of her Trotskyism.

¹⁰² Executive Secretary to Elis Sulkanen, 31 October 1928, Reel 9, Russian Center, PRL; Spector to Cannon, 6 December 1928; Cannon to Spector, 20 December 1928; Cowl to Cannon, 10 December 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL. The full history of the Finns interrogated by Lovestone et al, and their antagonism to "mechanical clique rule and bureaucratic commands" is extensively detailed in Minutes of the Political Committee of the CEC, 2 November 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL.

¹⁰³ For background on Konikow see Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 332–334, and the sources cited.

Defiant, Konikow refused to attend the kangaroo court. "Why can't a local committee consider my case," Konikow asked rhetorically, answering: "you are not sure that the local committee would act against me with the desired decision." Acknowledging that she was indeed working for "Trotsky's ideals," and that she had "tried to arouse sentiment for the Opposition in our Party," Konikow considered that the American Communist leadership had "taken an outrageously wrong stand on the Trotsky situation in Soviet Russia," a consequence of its "servile submission to the Stalin faction." Lovestone, who ran up against Konikow in a Boston Party meeting when he talked on the Trotsky question, was in no mood to let a District Committee handle what his Central Executive Committee's Political Committee could dispense with. Konikow's letter in hand, asserting that the irksome physician was "organizing a Trotskyist group in Boston," Lovestone secured a quick and unanimous vote to expel "Comrade, Dr., Mrs. Konikow." Gone from the Workers (Communist) Party was a woman of thirty-nine years' service in the socialist cause. Lovestone, describing Konikow as "the worst kind of Trotskyite biologically as well as politically," claimed Konikow had "no influence ... no following in the Boston section," and that Cannon would not welcome "the strength she will bring to his banner."¹⁰⁴

Lovestone was wrong on all counts. Within a month of her expulsion, Konikow rallied to her cause a small but committed bloc of comrades, most of whom were apparently Jewish immigrant workers. They called themselves the Independent Communist League, and they published *Bulletin No. 1* in December 1928. This *Bulletin* reprinted excerpts from the October 1928 statement by Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman, and promoted Eastman's book of Trotsky documents, *The Real Situation in Russia*. Nonetheless, in its appeal on behalf of the Russian Opposition, Konikow's bulletin concentrated its attack on the centralization of authority and bureaucratization of communist parties, locating the main problem as the "form of organization carried over from the time of the Russian revolution; namely, the centralized democracy now without democracy, the strict discipline now without previous discussion." Zinoviev in the Comintern, and Lovestone in the American Party, were particularly scorned. The former was castigated as "the first to establish boss rule" inside the Communist International, while the latter was pilloried for his "trickery and crookedness." The actual ideas of the international Left Opposition registered only weakly.

104 Minutes of the Political Committee of the CEC, 2 November 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL. Konikow's letter to Lovestone is published in full in "Letter to Lovestone by Antoinette Konikow," *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, 569–570.

To be sure, the Independent Communist League did not shy away from embracing Trotsky as one of the many victims of Stalin's increasingly authoritarian regime, but it had far too little to say about his penetrating criticisms of Comintern policies. "Socialism in one country" was not even mentioned in the four-page *Bulletin*. All of this prompted Cannon to comment to Spector, who heard of the existence of the Boston Oppositional sheet, that "It does not amount to much and has an entirely wrong line, very similar to [Ludwig] Lore"

Nonetheless, Konikow had been in touch with Cannon, and he planned to meet with her the last week of December 1928. She chaired the Boston meeting where Cannon first lectured on "The Truth About Trotsky and the Platform of the Russian Opposition," by which "a group of eight to ten comrades was consolidated ... around the program of Trotsky." From the almost immediate connection of the Cannon and Konikow forces, the pioneer socialist and birth control advocate worked tirelessly for the American Left Opposition. Konikow and her Boston allies would prove generous benefactors and increasingly staunch programmatic supporters of Trotskyism's United States beginnings. "We were rightly proud of our little *Bulletin*," Konikow would later write in the *Socialist Appeal*, noting that it was "heading in the right direction." Once connected to Cannon, the Boston Konikow group was pulled decisively toward the platform of the Left Opposition.¹⁰⁵

9 A Publication Program

Recruits, potential supporters, and those still incarcerated in the Stalinist politics of miseducation needed access to the schooling texts of Trotskyism. Original Left Opposition statements were not first written and published in English or, indeed, a number of other languages common in the United States and Canada. Building the library of the new movement was a pivotally important task. This involved first, acquisition, second, translation, and third, publication and distribution. A regularly published press was the lynchpin of this education for socialists, but it always had to be supplemented by the production of pamph-

¹⁰⁵ A copy of *Bulletin No. 1*, December 1928 is in MS Papers. Note, as well, Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 69; Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 190–191; Cannon to Shachtman, 20 December 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; "Opposition Meeting in Boston," *The Militant*, 15 January 1929; "Boston Works for a Weekly Militant Fund," *The Militant*, 1 April 1929; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 170–175; and Antoinette Konikow in *Socialist Appeal*, 22 October 1938, quoted in Myers, *The Prophet's Army*, 35.

lets and small, accessible books. Against Stalinist abdication of programmatic principle, on the one hand, and gangsterism and violence, on the other, Cannon and other American Trotskyists believed the word could prevail, as long as it was made available.

The American Left Opposition's publication program began with the portions of Trotsky's "Draft Program of the Communist International: A Criticism of Fundamentals," that both Cannon and Spector smuggled out of the Soviet Union as they departed the Sixth Congress. "We fully agree with the necessity of putting out the Platform and other material in cheap pamphlet form," Cannon wrote to Spector in December 1928, "It is all a question of funds. We want to bring out the program criticism first since it is basic theoretical material and is already more than half set at the printers." Having spent \$500, the New York comrades were now broke. "Every possible resource should be exhausted to raise [more] money," Cannon insisted. In mid-January 1929, with a seven-page introduction by Cannon, Trotsky's 139-page *The Draft Program of the Communist International* was ready for distribution, its two main sections addressing "A Program of International Revolution or a Program of Socialism in One Country" and "The Results and Prospects of the Chinese Revolution." Outside of Maurice Paz's *Contre Le Courant*, the American Left Opposition provided the only forum where Trotsky's founding document of the International Left Opposition could be found in a language other than Russian.¹⁰⁶

The road to publication of this pivotal pamphlet had been paved in a series of communications between the Toronto-New York axis that served as the early American Left Opposition's dialogue on the dissemination of Trotskyist ideas. Spector's brief European reconnaissance excursion in September – October 1928, resulted in him bringing back to Canada a variety of documents and publications, including the platform of the Russian Opposition, as well as its theses on crucial issues. Among this material was criticism of the Comin-

106 Cannon to Spector, 1 December 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; "Help Publish the Suppressed Documents of the Russian Opposition!" *The Militant*, 1 December 1928; Trotsky, *The Draft Program of the Communist International*; "Our First Pamphlet," *The Militant*, 1 January 1929; "Ready Now: *The Draft Program of the Communist International*," *The Militant*, 15 January 1929; *Dog Days*, 14. The Comintern-translated sections of Trotsky's "Draft Program," published in 1929 by the American Left Opposition, constituted Sections 1 and 3 of the entire draft. Section 2, which contained much of relevance to the United States, with Trotsky's critique of farmer-laborism, was unavailable in 1928–29 and would later be published in the United States by Cannon and his comrades as *The Strategy of the World Revolution* (New York: Communist League of America, 1930). Trotsky's *The Third International After Lenin* (New York: Pioneer, 1936) finally made the complete version available more than six years later.

tern's Chinese policies and of the practices of the Anglo-Russian Committee at the time of the British General Strike. Most of these documents were published in German, and Spector immediately undertook to translate critical writings, which were then copied and sent to New York and on to comrades in other cities. Spector also pushed Cannon and others in the United States to consider republication of some of the documents in Eastman's *The Real Situation in Russia*, which was available only in a costly commercial hardback edition, and was much in demand among Canadian comrades. "Unless we publish it in pamphlet form," Spector wrote, "it will not wield its potent influence." He also thought "translation into Yiddish and perhaps other languages would be very effective." Among the documents on China that Spector suggested be translated and published with a foreword were "Theses of Zinoviev on the Chinese Revolution," Trotsky's May 1927 Eighth Plenum of the Communist International Speech "On the Chinese Question," and a subsequent Trotsky statement on China. Drawing on a range of writings in French, German, and other languages, including material he obtained that reflected the perspective of oppositional-leaning groups associated with Hugo Urbahns (Germany), Boris Souvarine (France), and Amedeo Bordiga (Italy), Spector proposed that he "begin work on a brochure to be entitled, 'The Crisis in the Communist International!'"¹⁰⁷

In the regular back-and-forth across the Canada-United States border, the Cannon-Spector correspondence of November – December 1928 established the critical importance of a publication program and confirmed something of an emerging division of labor accepted by both of the Sixth Congress confidantes. If Spector deferred to Cannon on questions of political strategy and willingly assumed his place as junior to Cannon in the tactical decision-making of day-to-day developments, Cannon, in turn, looked to and trusted in the judgment of Spector on questions of the international alignment of the Left Opposition. "I followed the course advised by the Montreal wire," Spector assured Cannon in a late October communication, but asked, "How do you and the group conceive that my actions will be useful at a later date, and when? Have you discussed what use my representation on the ECCI can be put to?" Cannon had other kinds of questions for his younger comrade: "The German situation is not quite clear to us," he wrote in late December, asking if Spector could fill him in on some details and explain how they "square[d] with the impression we

107 Spector to Cannon, 16 October 1928, Spector to Cannon, 7 November 1928; Spector to Cannon, 27 November 1928; Cannon to Spector, 1 December 1928; Spector to Cannon, 3 December 1928; Cannon to Spector, 20 December 1928, all in Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL.

had in Moscow.” In New York, there was a pressing need to receive from Spector translations of the critical documents in his possession, as well as explanations of their meaning, so that potential recruits could be won over to Left Opposition positions:

Now here is a question of great importance to us. In one of your earlier letters you said you would translate the Opposition material from the Urbahns pamphlet. We badly need and are eagerly looking for the translations of all the material on the Chinese question and the Anglo-Russian question. Are you working on this? How soon can you send it? We have good prospects of publishing it in pamphlet form and besides it is badly needed for clarification of these questions. There is quite a demand for popular expositions of these controversial questions.¹⁰⁸

Spector’s many proposals and unique contributions were a prod to a publication program, and the Canadian Trotskyist contributed immeasurably to its realization.

It was Cannon, however, and the employed, relatively well-heeled and community-connected Minneapolis Left Oppositionists, who discussed what it would take to get the actual publication program off the ground. March – April 1929 correspondence initiated by Vincent Ray Dunne informed the New York comrades that a Minneapolis owner of a small drug store might well provide funds for a program of publication. The druggist, whose business served a prosperous middle-class clientele, had a long history of support for the revolutionary left. Soon Cannon was trying to parlay the possibilities into a plan to establish a modest publication plant, separate from the Left Opposition, but under its control, modeled on Chicago’s famous Charles H. Kerr publishing house. Cannon suggested to Dunne that it would be possible to publish a range of Trotsky’s writings in pamphlet form and, using the income generated from sales, sustain the operation. “Our idea is a real workers publishing house,” Cannon wrote, “concentrated on substantial works published in the cheapest form and widely distributed.” Assuring Dunne that Shachtman knew enough about printing to run things, Cannon urged his Minneapolis comrades to impress upon their relatively affluent Trotskyist sympathizer the need to

108 Spector to Cannon, 31 October–1 November 1928; and for one of Cannon’s most lengthy and explicit offerings of tactical advice, Cannon (Mit Gruss) to Spector, 5 November 1928, Reel 6, Russian Center, PRL; Cannon to Spector, 20 December 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL.

“advance enough money to float the buying of a plant.” There was some suggestion that this might be possible, but in the end the negotiations with the donor faltered.¹⁰⁹

Cannon considered the establishment of a publishing house central to the Left Opposition cause. It promised to bring down the costs of sustaining the press. The most important vehicle of early American Trotskyism’s dissemination of fundamental ideas was the Left Opposition’s newspaper, *The Militant*. Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman reached an agreement with Joe Cannata, a Wobbly Italian printer who had put out the ILD magazine, to print *The Militant* in mid-to-late October 1928. Shachtman would later suggest that Cannata came up with the name, but Cannon told Harry Ring in 1973 that it “was my proposition. In the old radical movement, the syndicalism and anarchist movement, a militant was the designation of a real active fighter I think the term has gone out of use.” By the first week of November 1928 three-quarters of the material was typeset. “We are keeping it secret,” Cannon told Spector, “and nobody appears to suspect that we are prepared to take such a bold step.” Funded from donations by Swabeck, Glotzer, and others in Chicago, as well as Max Eastman’s grandfathering of royalties from *The Real Situation in Russia*, *The Militant* came close to breaking whatever passed for the bank of the Left Opposition. “Just the physical factor of getting out *The Militant* and finding the money somewhere to pay for it,” was a challenge, Cannon remembered. This was especially the case for the first two issues. The Left Opposition mass mailed them to as many Party members as it could in order to promote the politics associated with the Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman expulsions, necessitating massive printings of 15,000 and 7,500. Thereafter the print-runs probably lessened to around 3,000. In December and January 1928–29, however, Cannon and his comrades were able “to saturate the party and its environs.” Postage alone, for the first issue, cost \$150.00. The eight-page bi-weekly, weighted down with Trotsky’s writings, quickly became the agitational lifeblood of what was now christened, with the establishment of its own press, a new movement. If Cannon was the nominal editor, it was Shachtman and Abern who, “almost from the first issue,” did most of the actual work. “Everything was centered around the paper,” Cannon recalled, insisting that *The Militant* was “the voice of the movement. Without a press, how are you going to build a movement?”¹¹⁰

109 Cannon to Dunne, 1, 2, 3 (two letters) April 1929; Cannon to Co-operative Publishing Association, 2 April 1929; Dunne to Cannon, 7 April 1929, all in Box 3, File 2, JPC Papers; Dunne to Comrades, 30 March 1929, Reel 20, JPC Papers.

110 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 55; Cannon (Mit Gruss) to Spector, 5 November 1928, Reel 6, Russian Center, PRL; Cannon to Spector, 1 December 1928, Reel 2D, Russian

The appearance of the first issue of *The Militant* brought recruits such as the Hungarians into the Cannon-led Left Opposition and it almost certainly jump-started the Lovestone reaction of violence and burglary. To have been able to put the paper together and distribute it effectively, given the conditions that Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman were forced to operate under, was an astounding accomplishment and attested to their acumen as well as their foresight. They managed, for instance, to secure important Party mailing lists prior to being banished from their former offices. "We have more than ten thousand addresses of the readers of party papers," Cannon wrote to Spector, impressing on his Toronto co-conspirator the necessity of securing similar important information before the Canadian was tossed out of the Party. "To fail in this would be a big mistake ... Once you get cut off from official channels, you will fully appreciate what a list of addresses means." By anticipating the importance of such seemingly mundane but in actuality crucially important endeavors, Cannon helped seal the success of *The Militant*.¹¹¹

Both Cannon and Spector agreed that *The Militant's* first numbers had a somewhat ponderous feel to them, with large and long articles predominating, and short, punchy news items in relatively short supply. With so much documentary material to publish so that readers would know the relevant positions this, they agreed, was inevitable. The premier issue, for instance, carried the Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern statement "For the Russian Opposition!" on pages one and two, as well as Cannon's page-long "Letter to a Comrade" on page three. It began serialization of Trotsky's "Draft Program of the Comintern." Finally, the Sixth Congress submission from the Foster-Cannon Minority Opposition criticizing the Lovestone leadership, "The Right Danger in the American Party," was serialized. It was something of a hangover from the pre-

Center, PRL; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 170–175; Ring interview, 24 October 1973, 1–3, 5, 14, 19; Eastman, *Love and Revolution*, 515. Eastman himself subscribed, and also paid for subscriptions for ten others, including Boris Souvarine, Alfred Rosmer, and Floyd Dell. See Eastman to Cannon [no date, December 1928], Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL.

111 Mit Gruss to Spector, 5 November 1928, Reel 6, Russian Center, PRL. On securing mailing lists see as well Martin Abern to Jay Lovestone, 11 October 1928; and A partial and untitled list of addresses, no date [October–November 1928], Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL. Spector to Cannon, 7 November 1928, Reel 2D, PRL, was beginning to voice a certain defensiveness with respect to prods from Cannon to attend to organizational matters. He suggested that his inability to recruit anyone to his stand was not to be put down "necessarily to lack of organizing ability on my part, as I anticipate you possibly may." Acknowledging his failure to get much in the way of mailing lists Spector reported that such lists for the larger circulation Party publications "have been kept under lock and key all that time I have been in the city. ... This is unfortunate, but you comrades were in a different position as far as the ILD was concerned."

Trotskyist days of the factional alignments of the late 1920s, often insightful in its discontents with the political direction of the Workers (Communist) Party leadership, but limited in its awareness of the developing Stalinization of the Comintern and its affiliated national sections. As Cannon suggested, given the importance of the documents and their suppression, it was essential that they be printed and distributed, and “a certain heaviness is not to be avoided. ... the main idea is that the paper is an organ of opinion and polemic” and that it was being directed to Party members and not necessarily a mass audience.¹¹²

The Militant was thus the crown jewel in the Left Opposition's publication program. It brought the original documents of central importance to the Workers (Communist) Party members interested in learning what was at stake in Trotsky's critique of the Stalinization of the Communist International into the open. Critical commentary by those in the United States who rejected the leadership of Lovestone was aired, and the failure to break from the generalized rightward drift of all who would not repudiate the politics – national and international – of “socialism in one country” often proved grist for the Left Opposition mill. In the months to come, with major documents now in print, *The Militant* opted for shorter articles and more statements on contemporary developments, news, and events. It kept readers abreast of ongoing expulsions within the Workers (Communist) Party, deplored the escalating Stalinist violence against Left Opposition members, and served as a sounding board for readers' thoughts, expressed in letters. Finally, the paper facilitated the ongoing pamphlet/book publication program which, while it never attained the level of sophistication discussed by Cannon and Dunne in 1929, did emerge out of these plans and develop. Building on the initial release of the two sections of Trotsky's *Draft Program*, the small and financially constrained Left Opposition undertook an ambitious program of pamphlet publication. In 1930 and 1931, eight pamphlets and one book by Trotsky appeared: *The Strategy of the World Revolution* (completing the criticism of the Communist International); *World Unemployment and the Five Year Plan*; *Problems of the Development of the USSR*; *The Turn in the CI and the Situation in Germany*; *Germany – the Key to the International Situation*; *The Spanish Revolution*; *The Spanish Revolution in Danger*; *Communism and Syndicalism*; and hard and paperback copies of *The Permanent Revolution*.

Translation was a difficult process, and one that taxed the fledgling movement to the breakpoint. Shachtman and the youth veteran of the Russian

112 Cannon to Spector, 1 December 1928; Spector to Cannon, 27–28 November 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL.

Revolution, the plumber Morris Lewit (Stein), did legion service. So pressed in this realm were Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman in late 1928, for instance, that Shachtman trusted Whitakker Chambers, active in the editorial offices of the *Daily Worker*, with a rare document in German, Trotsky's "Appeal to the Sixth Congress of the Communist International." Chambers approached Shachtman furtively, expressing his sympathy for the cause of the Left Opposition. Shachtman showed Chambers the document, and the latter offered to translate it so that it could appear in *The Militant*. The trusting Shachtman handed the prized article over, never to see it again. Chambers immediately ran to Lovestone with the Trotsky statement. Such setbacks, however irritatingly time-consuming, did not derail the publication program. Trotsky's appeal would eventually appear in the third issue of *The Militant*. By 1932 the American Left Opposition would also be publishing a youth organ, *Young Spartacus*; a semi-monthly Yiddish language paper, *Unser Kampf*, edited and produced by Lewit and his dynamic wife and trade union militant, Sylvia Bleeker; and *Kommunistes*, a Greek monthly.¹¹³

A non-Party supporter wrote to Cannon with praise for *The Militant* and its editors:

The Partyites are reduced to the necessity of suppressing the arguments and facts they cannot face. It is a cowardly method of fighting – with which the fearless revolutionist can have no patience. ... I like your stand. The tone of your writing rings true. There is no whine in it – and no tire-

¹¹³ On the beginnings of CLA pamphlet publication see Cannon to Vincent Ray Dunne, 2 April 1929 and 3 April 1929; Cannon to Co-operative Publishing Association, 3 April 1929, all in Box 3, File 2, JPC Papers. Note Cannon's effort to raise money for the publication of Trotsky pamphlets in Cannon to Buehler, 31 January 1931, published as "Financing 'Communism and Syndicalism,'" in *James P. Cannon – Writings and Speeches, 1928–31: The Left Opposition in the US*, 313–314. See, for the Chambers anecdote, James P. Cannon, *Notebook of an Agitator* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1958), 303 and for the later publication, Trotsky, "The July Plenum and the Right Danger," *The Militant*, 15 December 1928. For Cannon's contributions to *The Militant* in this period see the selection of writings present in *James P. Cannon – Writings and Speeches, 1928–31: The Left Opposition in the US*. A 1930 statement of the publication program appears in "Communist League to Print Important Books," *The Militant*, 15 April 1930. On Lewit and Bleeker see Paul Le Blanc and Michael Steven Smith, "Morris Lewit: Pioneer Leader of American Trotskyism (1903–1998)," in Paul Le Blanc and Tom Barrett, eds., *Revolutionary Labor Socialist: The Life, Ideas, and Comrades of Frank Lovell* (Union City, NJ: Smyrna Press, 2000), 272–301; Frank Lovell, "Sylvia Bleeker (1901–1988): Union Organizer, Socialist Agitator, and Lifelong Trotskyist," *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism*, 59 (1989), 16–19; Sylvia Bleeker, "In the Needle Trades: Tasks Before the Plenum of the Needle Trades Industrial Union," and "Prospects for Jewish Paper Bright – *Unser Kampf*," *The Militant*, 2 January 1932; Morris Lewit and Sylvia Bleeker, "*Unser Kampf* Tour Concludes with the Launching of Workers' Clubs," *The Militant*, 7 January 1933.

some Wolfeish hypocrisy and whang-doodle. Paid propaganda – even in a revolutionary cause – loses its vitality, and tends toward corruption.

As Trotsky wrote of *The Militant's* French counterpart, *Verité*, or *Truth*, the main objective of the Left Opposition was not to “distort, nor to select tendentially, not to gloss over, not to sweeten, but to say honestly what is what.”¹¹⁴ This was the banner under which *The Militant* and its publication program proceeded over the course of 1928 and 1929. To formalize the substantial gains registered during a few tumultuous months, the Left Opposition began, in February – March 1929, to wield together the locally embedded elements that comprised its ranks.

10 The Founding of the Communist League of America (Opposition)

After a few months, then, “The Three Generals,” Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman, not only had something of an army, admittedly one top-heavy with lieutenants, but they could also boast of a press and a presence that exceeded significantly what would have seemed commensurate with the numbers of recruits coming their way. In Minneapolis, for instance, the Left Opposition candidate for mayor in a 13 May 1928 municipal contest outpolled the Communist Party’s nominee, drawing 896 votes to the only other left/labor candidate’s 827; within the Twin Cities Ladies’ Auxiliary of the Independent Workmen’s Circle, a similar contest between Stalinists and Trotskyists unfolded. Contact was established with Trotsky, and Cannon and his allies broke from the insulating fixation on “American questions” that preoccupied them during their days in the Workers (Communist) Party.¹¹⁵

Having determined that they would fight their struggle against the Stalinization of the Communist International and the leadership of the Workers (Communist) Party within the United States entirely through appeals to the ranks of

114 Armistead Collier to Cannon [no date, November – December 1928], Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; “Why We Publish the Militant,” *The Militant*, 14 December 1929.

115 The American Left Opposition’s initial contact with Trotsky can be traced in *The Militant*: “A Letter from Trotsky’s Wife,” 1 February 1929; “On the Legend of ‘Trotskyism,’” 1 March 1929; “Comrade Trotsky to the American Opposition,” 3 April 1929; “Tasks of the American Opposition: A Letter from Comrade Trotsky,” 1 June 1928. On the Minneapolis mayoralty race see Vincent R. Dunne, “The Minneapolis Elections: Comrade C.R. Hedlund Is Our Candidate for Mayor,” *The Militant*, 1–15 May 1929; “Opposition Progress in Minneapolis Vote,” *The Militant*, 1 June 1929; also, “Minneapolis Stalinists Disrupt the Ladies Auxiliary,” *The Militant*, 15 February 1930.

the Moscow-aligned Communist organization, Cannon and his fellow Oppositionists were necessarily restricted in their activities. Public talks on “The Truth About Trotsky” opened Left Opposition doors to non-Party members, to be sure, but the desired audience was always construed more narrowly. Especially favored were the proletarian ranks associated with Foster’s forces. The second issue of *The Militant* carried Cannon’s triumphant proclamation, “The Party ‘Discussion’ Opens!” Communists were urged to reject the Foster group’s contradictory stand. This meant repudiating the rightward political tilt of the Party leadership nationally and addressing the international implications of this impulse in terms of an open engagement with the issues of fundamental criticism raised by the Left Opposition. Cannon was vehement in dismissing the Lovestone-Pepper Majority of the Central Executive Committee. It was nothing more than a puppet contingent imposed on the Workers (Communist) Party by the anti-Trotsky faction of the Communist International. “The bureaucrats who rule by decree,” said Cannon, “set up a conception of the Comintern which Lenin never knew.” Insisting that American communists “do not know the issues from all sides and cannot know them for the reason that the material of the Opposition was not published – it was suppressed,” Cannon called for Party members to begin the discussion. This necessitated a “break with the tactic of tailing after the expulsion policy of the right wing splitters” and “to take up the struggle against [them].” As he had in his speech before the December 1928 Plenum of the Workers (Communist) Party, Cannon expressed confidence that “the proletarian ranks” would call him and other Oppositionists back to “their rightful places to the Party which we have helped to build and from which no power on earth can tear us away.”¹¹⁶

This orientation continued as the Workers (Communist) Party prepared for its 1–9 March 1929 Sixth National Convention, the Lovestone forces overwhelmingly dominant with 95 of the 104 delegates and seemingly very much in control.¹¹⁷ Yet as Cannon and his comrades in the Left Opposition pointed out, the platform of Trotsky and the Left Opposition had become the cloud hanging over the Workers (Communist) Party. Both the Foster and Lovestone groups promised a “broad ideological campaign” to clear the Party air on the Cannon,

¹¹⁶ Cannon, “The Party ‘Discussion’ Opens!” *The Militant*, 1 December 1928; “Our Appeal to the Party Members,” *The Militant*, 1 January 1929, both reprinted in *James P. Cannon – Writings and Speeches, 1928–31: The Left Opposition in the US*, 52–58, 66–75.

¹¹⁷ As introductions to this context see, for instance, Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 377–404; Robert J. Alexander, *The Right Opposition: The Lovestoneites and the International Communist Opposition of the 1930s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 11–23.

Abern, and Shachtman October 1928 declaration in support of "The Russian Opposition." Nothing of the sort happened. Instead:

Not a single one of the Trotsky-killers has ventured to take issue with the Trotsky platform on a single point. ... By expulsion and terror they sought to prevent discussion even during the fraudulent 'discussion period'. But they failed. They only succeeded in making it 'illegal'. They drove it 'underground'. It has a lively existence there. The Party members are discussing the forbidden questions universally. These questions dominate the Party thought. Fundamental principle questions are occupying the attention of the comrades to a greater extent than at any time since 1919. More than 100 Party members have openly proclaimed their allegiance to the platform of the Opposition at the cost of expulsion.

The Militant no doubt exaggerated the extent of discussion among the Party rank-and-file, but it captured something of the leadership's failure to stifle the crisis unfolding within American communism. With the Sixth Convention looming, both the Lovestone and Foster factions had essentially capitulated to Stalinism. On the one hand, "The readiness of the Pepper-Lovestone clique to support any infamy in the fight against Trotsky, and even to demand 'harsher' measures, has been their charter from the ECCI to control the Party." On the other, "Foster and Bittelman are fooling the proletarian fighters in the Party with all kinds of rumors, illusions and false hopes. They are waiting for a 'cable'; a new secretarial decision; a new 'concession' from Moscow." *The Militant* predicted: "The Convention will not and can not end the factional struggle. It will only clear the ground for its higher development into a struggle for the reconstitution of the unity of the Party on the basis of principle." In this the Left Opposition was both immediately right, but politically overly sanguine. It underestimated Stalinism's capacity to actually clear the American Party slate of factional debris and impose a mechanical and unprincipled unity. Too prone to see in the Lovestone-Pepper forces the instinctual beneficiaries of Stalinist machinations, and bonded loosely by a generation of class struggle and factional alliance to the Foster-Bittelman group as the more proletarian body, however fundamentally compromised it was in its centrist adaptations, Cannon misjudged the immediate future of the Party. He nonetheless saw correctly how little could be garnered if the "factional excrescence" could not be transcended. The American Left Opposition hinted, for the first time, of the need for a broad discussion of Leninist principle "inside and outside the Party ranks."¹¹⁸

118 "On the Eve of the Party Convention," *The Militant*, 1 February 1929.

Cannon, Swabeck, Abern, and Shachtman combined to produce the Opposition's most detailed statement, "Platform of the Communist Opposition," in February 1929. Taking up an entire issue and more of *The Militant*, and addressed to the Sixth Convention of the Workers (Communist) Party, the Platform was a forceful blend of international and national criticisms. It commenced with the centrality of the Russian Revolution's meaning, detailing how the crisis within the Comintern spelled the death knell of Leninism with its retreat into the 'theory' of 'socialism in one country', premised as it was on a capitulationist understanding of the "the technical, economic and political stabilization of capitalism." Insisting that the Stalinist regime had "invented the myth of 'Trotskyism,'" which it used as a smokescreen to obscure its bureaucratic methods and abandonment of Leninist principle, the Cannon forces situated themselves as a Bolshevik Opposition defending the Russian Revolution and organizing the working class against two dire threats: "imperialist intervention from without and ... the danger of Thermidor from within."

Turning to the United States, the threat of imperialist war, and the economic and political situation of the working class, the document laid out a prescient prognosis:

the internal contradictions of American imperialism, bound up with its world economic interdependence, are maturing a severe crisis which is foreshadowed by the current partial industrial depression. The present situation, which is only a harbinger of this coming crisis, has already brought to a high level the process of rationalization and attack upon the standards of the working class that is causing it to move progressively away from its previous inertia into a period of struggles. The realization of the crisis, which will intensify the process of rationalization, increase unemployment, and lead to more severe attacks on the living standards of the workers, will result in an even broader basis for the radicalization of the American workers and their entry into struggle. This process of radicalization is taking place now. It is a process which must be analyzed not only in comparison with the leftward movement of European workers, but chiefly in comparison with the historical backwardness of the American working class. Upon this development is conditioned the coming period of struggles of the American workers and the necessity for the revolutionary party to understand it and prepare itself properly for it.

Cognizant of the failure of the Communists to register gains in the 1928 election and of the ossification of the American Federation of Labor unions, the Left Opposition called for putting trade union work on a new footing. "The

organization of the unorganized, into new unions, the foremost and basic task, must go hand in hand with intensified work in the old unions, including those which exist alongside of new unions, and a revival of the discarded united front tactic." Singling out for particular criticism the Party's underestimation of "the tremendous importance of revolutionary work among the Negro masses," the Left Opposition grappled forthrightly but inadequately with Party policy in this area. The Platform continued to embrace the 1928 communist "slogan of the right of self-determination for the Negroes," but it rejected as false the Pepper-produced rallying cry of a "Negro Soviet Republic in the South," just as it insisted that all work among African Americans "must from the very beginning be based on leadership by the Negro proletariat." Standing decisively on the national *and* international imperative of struggling against "opportunism and bureaucratic corruption," the Platform of the Communist Opposition railed against the deficiencies of both the Lovestone-Pepper group at the helm of the Party and the fragmented Foster-Bittelman forces, situating each contingent within the Stalinization of the Communist International and the American Party.

Cannon, Swabeck, Abern, and Shachtman detailed how the Party was transformed for the worse over the course of the late 1920s. Membership declined, especially among "native American and trade union elements." Party democracy was destroyed: "there is far less freedom of expression ... today, working under legal conditions and during a pre-Convention discussion period, than there was normally in the underground, illegal Party." The cancer of bureaucratization was eating away at the body politic of American Communism. Permanent, relentless factionalism sapped the energies of Party militants. The leadership of the revolutionary organization stood condemned as following a course of "opportunist-adventurist shifting from day to day according to factional and inner-Party exigency." Refusing their banishment, Cannon, Swabeck, Abern, and Shachtman, speaking for themselves and the over 100 other comrades expelled for their Oppositional stand, stood on their record as "a nucleus of Communists who have participated in the founding of the Party and who have played a decisive and progressive part in all the work of the Party since its inception." They called on Party members to reinstate them and their counterparts in the Russian and International Oppositions.¹¹⁹

It was not to be. The March 1929 Workers (Communist) Party convention is often depicted as the most tumultuous in the already wild, if brief, history

119 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon, Swabeck, Abern, and Shachtman, "Platform of the Communist Opposition," *The Militant*, 15 February 1929, reprinted in *James P. Cannon – Writings and Speeches, 1928–1931: The Left Opposition in the US*, 83–125. See also Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 75–76.

of such gatherings. It ended in pitched battles among factional adversaries. Whether it actually surpassed its Chicago, August 1925 counterpart in terms of violent commotion is debatable,¹²⁰ but what is not open to question is the extent to which all else paled in significance before Stalin's decisive and unprecedented (in terms of its directness) intervention in the proceedings. Moving to displace Bukharin from his position of authority within the Communist International, Stalin regarded the Lovestone-Pepper leadership of the American Party as aligned with his most-recent Russian opponent. In an arbitrary assertion of his power, Stalin instructed the American Party convention through his emissaries that the Lovestone Majority, as strong as it may have appeared on the convention floor, was not favored with the blessings of ultimate Soviet authority. No faction was without its flaws, in the judgment of Stalin's chosen messengers. In an organizational dictate, Foster was to be General Secretary and the factional leaders of contending groups, Lovestone and Bittelman, were to be recalled to Moscow. This strong-arm move, which threatened to displace Lovestone entirely and emasculate somewhat Foster, who would be deprived of his leading adviser and owe his position of authority entirely to Stalin, was resisted by the convention delegates, overwhelmingly controlled by Lovestone. In the back and forth between the convention and the Comintern, Stalin relented somewhat, but only in terms of a disingenuous diplomacy. He agreed, in a rare and unprecedented personal communication, that the convention could indeed elect its own Central Executive Committee and determine who would be the General Secretary, thus depriving Foster, who had experienced such disappointment before, of his coveted leadership position. Yet he also summoned Lovestone, Bittelman, and Pepper to Moscow, and subjected all convention decisions to a Comintern review. Throughout all of this, Lovestone began to lose control of his factional lieutenants, who could see the writing on the collapsing Bukharin wall, which was bringing down their American Party head as well. Foster was subjected to a humiliating trashing that would continue for months, and that Stalin contributed to with his allegations before an April 1929 "American Commission" in Moscow that the venerable revolutionary syndicalist had consorted with "hidden Trotskyists" in his caucusing with Cannon's forces. All factions thus collapsed inward in an organizational suppression of political differences that rallied around the Communist International's unambiguously Stalinist standard. In closed caucus meetings, leading Party figures conceded, "Stalin has the gun before our noses. Either give him what he wants

120 See, for instance, Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 244–245; Gitlow, *I Confess*, 273–275; Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 25; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 86–88.

or pay with our lives." Yet on the floor of the convention, factional heads outdid themselves in closing resolutions with "Hail to Stalin!" For all the fisticuffs that punctuated the out-of-control event, the Sixth Party convention, as Cannon wrote in *The Militant*, was a *fait accompli*: "It could not be otherwise. This bankruptcy is only the reflection of the political and ideological collapse of the Stalinist regime in the Communist International, a regime which stultifies revolutionary thought, suppresses discussion, and undertakes to solve all difficulties which arise from its barren policy with organizational manipulations. The unanimous endorsement of the Stalin leadership by the Convention was an appropriate act."¹²¹

No sooner had the Workers (Communist) Party convention run its course, its now discredited factional leaders scurrying to Moscow to face their final drubbing by Stalin, than Cannon, writing on behalf of a somewhat grandiosely-named National Action Committee, issued a call for the first conference of the American Left Opposition. It was to be held in Chicago, on 17 May 1929. A shoestring affair, the conference delegates were to be elected by all groups supporting the Platform of the Communist Opposition; they were to pay their own way, and would be billeted by the Chicago group. An agenda was established, in which the central issues followed closely the elaboration of concerns outlined in the lengthy Platform document authored by Cannon, Swabeck, Abern, and Shachtman. Their appeal to the Sixth convention of the Workers (Communist) Party rejected, and the convention decision denying the Left Opposition the right to be heard, did not shake the determination of Cannon and others. Yet it could not help but impress upon them that there was a need to widen the work of political mobilization: "Alongside the task of penetrating ever deeper into the Party ranks with our agitation, we have the task of recruiting and organizing the revolutionary workers outside the party who are becoming attracted to our banner in large numbers. ... The problem of organizing them is not separate from the work within the Party ranks but is bound up with it. The National Conference of the Opposition must work out the organization form for this double task." Trotsky wrote to the American Opposition to welcome the initiative. "In the work which you are doing, well-formed organization is necessary," Trotsky insisted, adding that his United States supporters should not be put off by, "the cry about a second party and a fourth international." While the resources of the Stalinized Comintern were enormous, the International itself

121 Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 377–411; Gitlow, *I Confess*, 510–531; Wolfe, *A Life in Two Centuries*, 554; Johanningsmeir, *Forging American Communism*, 246–247; Cannon, "The Results of the Party Convention," *The Militant*, 15 March 1929; "Stalin Versus Bucharin! The Struggle in the Russian Communist Party," *The Militant*, 15 March 1929.

was not reducible to the bureaucracy and its “present governing faction.” On the contrary, that demoralized hierarchy was “politically and theoretically dead already.” Those in the United States who understood this, in their new phase of consolidation, would, Trotsky predicted, come to occupy a worthy place under the banner of Marx and Lenin, which was firmly in the hands of the International Left Opposition.¹²²

Cannon’s work in preparation for the conference would include long articles in *The Militant* on organizing the unorganized communists and the importance of the trade union question. In this writing, Cannon tried to prepare those won to the Left Opposition for the difficult and protracted nature of their struggle, stressing as well the necessity to avoid “exaggeration, bombast, false claims, and self-deception.” Striking a hard and sobering note of realism, Cannon pointed out that the “monstrous perversions” that had been bred within the Communist International over a period of years would not be vanquished overnight. “To fight for the fundamental line of Marx and Lenin within the communist ranks today means to swim against the stream,” he wrote, adding that, “We never promised a quick victory, and we do not promise it now.”

Pressing Spector to move to New York, where he would be able to play a much larger role in the editorial work of *The Militant*, Cannon privately informed his original partner in the Left Opposition enterprise of what the National Conference was embarking upon. “Our own opinions are becoming quite firmly fixed along the lines of forming a Communist League on the order of the Leninbund as a single type of organization,” wrote Cannon, “recruiting new workers as well as Party members and having fixed and uniform dues.” Wondering what the relationship of the Canadian and United States sections of such an organization would be, and whether the Canadian component could belong to the larger body, Cannon was obviously more concerned with how to proceed with respect to the previously-agreed upon accent on orienting to the Party and to it alone. Acknowledging that the possibilities in the Party were not exhausted, Cannon nonetheless had come to a new mindset about the limitations of addressing only that milieu, which he saw as decidedly in decline. There were, he insisted, thousands of young workers free from Stalinist “fakirism and corruption” who could be drawn to Leninism, and there was a great need, if the Left Opposition was to grow, to avoid merely drifting along in old habits. Older Wobblies were coming to their meetings, seeking out the Left Opposition, and

122 Cannon, “Call for a National Conference of the Opposition,” *The Militant*, 15 March 1929; Cannon, “Next Steps in the Struggle: Material for the National Conference Discussion,” *The Militant*, 1 April 1929; “Tasks of the American Opposition: A Letter from Comrade Trotsky,” *The Militant*, 1 June 1929.

Cannon saw much to be gained in working with them on a Trade Union Educational League-like basis. To do so the Left Opposition had to form a more definite organization. (This optimism about what could be done in work largely external to the “official party” would, in the months to come, lessen appreciably before it would, in differing circumstances, revive once again.) Other correspondence with Vincent Ray Dunne, Arne Swabeck, and Albert Glotzer reiterated these positions and tried to consolidate agreement on areas where qualms existed or questions arose, especially in terms of issues such as the labor party or black self-determination. In this pre-conference period, all indications are that it was, once again, Cannon the caretaker of revolutionary organization who was attending to the machinery of an emerging apparatus.¹²³

The Communist League of America (Opposition), known to its supporters by the acronym CLA or as the League, was founded in Chicago over the course of three days, 17–19 May 1929. Its host group was given an infusion of members by seven expulsions from the Communist Party, four of whom immediately joined the CLA. This likely brought the Chicago membership to about 20, which placed it alongside the New York and Minneapolis locals as one of the three leading branches. These centers of the Left Opposition each contributed five voting delegates to the total of 31, supplemented by 17 alternatives. Twelve cities were represented at the Windy City founding of the League, but there were also locales and individuals – such as Plentywood, Montana or the southern-based John and Mack Rust – with no delegates in Chicago. All told, the Left Oppositionists probably numbered between 100 and 120 members in the late spring of 1929, but to the founders of the CLA this small but focused group was a momentous beginning. Spector attended with two comrades from Canada. It was decided that, for the time being, Canadian branches would affiliate with their United States counterparts in a single organization. A National Committee composed of Cannon, Spector, Abern, Shachtman, Swabeck, Skoglund, and Glotzer was elected, with Vincent Ray Dunne an alternate. This body would direct the work of the new organization, which was empowered to charter new locals, enroll members at an initiation fee of 50 cents, with monthly dues of the same amount, and to “carry on a program of independent activities in the class struggle,” as well as continuing to work as “a fraction within the Party.” Cannon, as the National Secretary, would work most closely in the National

123 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon, “Organize the Unorganized Communists,” *The Militant*, 15 April 1929; Cannon, “Our Conference and the Trade Unions,” *The Militant*, 1–15 May 1929; Cannon to Spector, 1 April 1929; Cannon to Vincent Ray Dunne, 1 April 1929; Cannon to Vincent Ray Dunne, 2 April 1929; Cannon to Swabeck, 20 April 1929; Cannon to Spector, 20 April 1929; Cannon to Glotzer, 22 April 1929, all in Box 3, Folder 2, JPC Papers.

Center with others resident in New York: Abern, Shachtman and, in due course, Spector. Conference reports reflected the CLA's concerns, the leading cadres of what was hailed as a collective leadership addressing the situation in Russia, the crisis in the Communist International, the American situation, trade union questions, youth, the press and literature, and the organization of the Opposition. Fraternal greetings came from Trotsky, the imprisoned CLA member Maurice Malkin, and International Left Opposition groups in Europe. If unanimity most often prevailed on the group's previously-published Platform, there was sufficient discussion and dispute about how to formulate policy on the Labor Party and Self-Determination for Negroes planks that final resolution of these issues was deferred. Struggling to consolidate a "new grouping in the Party on our Platform," it was unanimously agreed that its orientation was to be supplemented with "the development of our organization and the recruitment of new revolutionary workers outside the Party ranks." Enthusiastic and determined, the founding conference of the CLA closed with pledges of material support for *The Militant* and the singing of The Internationale. Later that evening, the CLA held its first open meeting at Chicago's Redifer Hall, with Cannon, Spector, Swabeck, and Vincent Ray Dunne speaking on "The Truth About Trotsky and the Opposition Program."¹²⁴

The formation of the Communist League of America undoubtedly lifted the spirits of Cannon. He had marshaled the American Left Opposition through

124 "Chicago Workers! Greet the National Conference of the Communist Opposition," *The Militant*, 1–15 May 1929; Cannon, "Conference of the Opposition Communists: Formation of the Communist League of America (Opposition)," *The Militant*, 1 June 1929; Minutes of the Provisional Conference Committee, 14 May 1929, Box 35, Folder 3, GB Papers. See, as well, Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 77–79; "Constitution of the Communist League," *The Militant*, 14 December 1929. On isolated locals and individuals, about which little is known, see Ring interview, 24 October 1973; Reba Hansen, in Les Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 274–275; Covington Hall to Cannon, 14 July 1930, Box 3, File 3, JPC Papers. Cannon's *History of American Trotskyism* reports an early membership figure for the CLA of 100, but my sense is that this understates the actual count slightly. Plentywood was associated with T.J. O'Flaherty, and would figure in a contentious 1930 farmer-laborite initiative centered around the *Producer News*, co-edited by O'Flaherty. As a CLA member, O'Flaherty pitched the possibility of a "general communist organ with a humorous touch" that would promote a new Farmer-Labor Party of Montana, a cause backed by a variety of non-CLA forces. After an initial, uncritical (and challenged) endorsement within the Minneapolis CLA, the National Committee intervened to scotch the scheme, and O'Flaherty would eventually break from the Left Opposition in the United States as a consequence. See Roskolenko, *When I Was Last on Cherry Street*, 112–113; *Dog Days*, 53; "On the Proposal for a New Farmer-Labor Party Fraud: Against Opportunism and Adventurism of the Right Wing," *The Militant*, 1 November 1929. On Plentywood in general see McDonald, *The Red Corner*.

some stormy seas, suffering expulsion from the Party he loved and ostracism from friends and comrades. The Communist International and its American section seemed hell bent on implementing a Third Period program “for the organizing of Communist sects rather than mass organizations.” In the area of Party policy that had always drawn his keenest interest, that of the trade unions, Cannon would write to Swabeck that, “The party is wrong in bringing out a program for a new trade union movement all along the line. It is wrong in undertaking to monopolize the control of the new unions in a narrow party sense.” With the brawling at the Workers (Communist) Party Sixth Convention, Cannon had seen revealed “the interest-payment received by the Party on its investment in the methods of gangsterism against the Opposition.” Cannon, in short, could feel vindicated in his anti-Stalinist stand, and the emergence of the CLA provided an organizational icing on this cake of achievement. He had hopes for the establishment of a League print shop and wrote, his enthusiasm tempered with humor, to Spector: “If it goes through we are on solid ground for the next six months at least. After that – perhaps a revolution.”¹²⁵

For Cannon, the six months and slightly more that had elapsed since his public declaration of adherence to Trotskyism and resulting expulsion from the Workers (Communist) Party was a momentous period. It developed “much more successfully” than he and Spector imagined possible when they returned to North America from Moscow and the Sixth Congress in September – October 1928.¹²⁶ Could the momentum be sustained? The next year would see a series of new and unanticipated challenges, ushering in what Cannon would later designate the dog days. They were times to try the revolutionary resolve of even the staunchest of militants.

¹²⁵ Cannon, “Party Convention Results,” *The Militant*, 15 March 1929; Cannon to Swabeck, 20 April 1929; Cannon to Spector, 20 April 1929, Box 3, File 2, JPC Papers.

¹²⁶ Cannon to Spector, 1 April 1929, republished in full in *James P. Cannon – Writings and Speeches, 1928–1931: The Left Opposition in the US*, 151.



FIGURE 1 James P. Cannon, 1935
SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY, PATHFINDER PRESS, NEW YORK, NEW YORK,
STEVE CLARK



FIGURE 2
Rose Karsner, mid-1920s
WALTA ROSS, PROMETHEUS RESEARCH LIB-
RARY, NEW YORK, NEW YORK



FIGURE 3
Maurice Spector, 1932
ARCHIVES OF THE LAW SOCIETY OF UPPER
CANADA, P465, CHARLES AYLETT



FIGURE 4 Max Shachtman, late 1920s/early 1930s
MAX SHACHTMAN PAPERS, TAMIMENT LIBRARY, NEW YORK, NEW YORK,
NP.087, BOX 1, FOLDER DUPLICATES



FIGURE 5 Martin Abern, late 1920s/early 1930s
MAX SHACHTMAN PAPERS, TAMIMENT LIBRARY, NEW YORK, NP.087, BOX 1, FOLDER 9



FIGURE 6 Maurice Spector and Max Shachtman, Spain, 1931-1932
MAX SHACHTMAN PAPERS, TAMIMENT LIBRARY, NP.087, BOX 1,
FOLDER 10



FIGURE 7 Pierre Naville, French Trotskyist, 1930
MAX SHACHTMAN PAPERS, TAMIMENT LIBRARY, NP.087, BOX 1,
FOLDER 10



FIGURE 8 Albert Glotzer, Berlin, 1931
AUFNAHME VON FRANZ PFEMFERT PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHIE,
ALBERT GLOTZER, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 9 Arne Swabeck, 1934, Communist League of America Headquarters, New York
INTERNATIONAL NEWS PHOTOS, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 10 Vincent Ray Dunne, 1930s
JEAN TUSSEY, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 11 Communist League of America, National Committee, 1934, left to right: Martin Abern, Vincent Ray Dunne, Carl Skoglund, Maurice Spector, Arne Swabeck, Max Shachtman (absent: James P. Cannon, Albert Glotzer)

MAX SHACHTMAN PAPERS, TAMIMENT LIBRARY, NP.087, BOX 1, FOLDER 10



FIGURE 12
Gerry Allard, editor *Progressive Miner*, 1930s
PROMETHEUS RESEARCH LIBRARY



FIGURE 13 Sylvia Bleeker and Morris Lewit, New York, 1930s
MORRIS LEWIT, PROMETHEUS RESEARCH LIBRARY



FIGURE 14 Jean van Heijenoort (Trotsky's personal secretary, 1932–1939) and Max Shachtman, Paris, 1933
MAX SHACHTMAN PAPERS, TAMIMENT LIBRARY, NP.087, BOX 1,
FOLDER 10

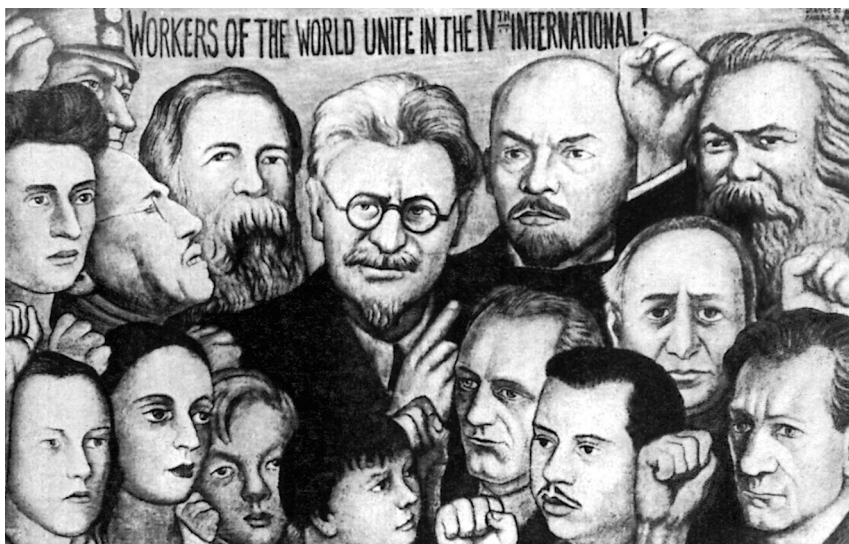


FIGURE 15 Diego Rivera Mural, Communist League of America Headquarters, New York, 1933, Lower Row, left to right: Ruth Cannon (daughter of James P. Cannon), Sarah Avrin, Edgar Swabeck (son of Arne Swabeck), Carlo Cowl (son of Sarah Avrin), Arne Swabeck, Max Shachtman, James P. Cannon
PROMETHEUS RESEARCH LIBRARY

Dog Days

1 Downturn: Economic Depression

The Communist League of America (Opposition) came into being against long odds. Founding figures of the League/CLA sacrificed much and staked their all on the creation of a movement that, metaphorically, defied political gravity. Born of audacity and insistence that principle would triumph over ruthless power, the CLA challenged capitalist hegemony, on the one hand and, on the other, the tightening stranglehold of Stalinism over both the Communist International and its American affiliate, the Communist Party, USA [CPUSA/CP]. As a *propaganda* group oriented to the existing party of official communism, the CLA was born struggling to rekindle the fires of Leninist fundamentals in a body that had expelled those making this appeal. The CP had also orchestrated a campaign of denunciation and terror that would, in its beginnings, drive some communists into the Left Opposition's arms. Eventually this physical and psychological war, waged against an opponent significantly weaker in terms of its human and material resources, if not its arguments, took its toll.

Max Shachtman later suggested that official communist misrepresentation soon came to be embraced as “the common view in the ranks of the movement.” Antagonism to Trotskyism became, over time, “worse, not better – sharper and more embittered, not more conciliatory.” The League was denounced as “counter-revolutionary,” regarded as aiming at “the overthrow of the socialist state and the restoration of capitalism.” What would anger committed communists more, Shachtman asked rhetorically, than “criticism of the Russian regime, not in the language of capitalists or social democrats, but in the language of Communism itself, the language which was the natural tongue of Trotskyism?”¹

Cannon's first six months as a leader of the Left Opposition saw him make “steady progress,” and with the formation of the CLA as a national organization he was optimistic about dissident communism's prospects. As the tenth number of *The Militant* was about to appear, Cannon enthused to Vincent Ray Dunne: “Things have surely happened in the past five months! Let us hope for as

1 Max Shachtman, “Radicalism in the Thirties: The Trotskyist View,” in Rita James Simon, ed., *As We Saw the Thirties: Essays on Social and Political Movements of a Decade* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 18–19.

much in the next five.” Nonetheless, Cannon was well aware that he and those around him were tilting their revolutionary sails into strong winds of resistance. “Nothing we have done so far was possible,” he wrote to Maurice Spector in 1929, “it was done only because it had to be done.” If Cannon and the CLA were to ever springboard off the treadmill of necessity, making a leap into the realm of desired breakthroughs, they would need to experience some good fortune. Small gains notwithstanding, this was not to be, at least not immediately. From mid-1929 into 1933, Cannon and the CLA found themselves “stymied,” stuck in “the real dog days of the Left Opposition.”²

There were a variety of external reasons, beyond the campaign of distortion and denunciation waged against the Left Opposition on the part of the official Communist movement’s leadership, why the high hopes of May 1929 faltered. As a small and precarious external, oppositional faction of the Communist Party, the CLA was limited in what it could accomplish in the first years of devastating economic dislocation occasioned by the Great Depression. This structural constraint, moreover, was exacerbated by developments within both the Communist International and the CPUSA which, in the immediate context of 1929, closed doors of opportunity that were, to begin with, at best only slightly ajar.

No sooner had the roughly 50 Left Oppositionists who made their way to Chicago to attend the founding conference of the CLA settled back into their locales of origin than they confronted the collapse of the American economy. As the Great Depression unfolded, its earliest years were the most devastating. Between 1929–33 industrial production dropped almost 50 per cent, and national income plummeted from \$81 billion in 1929 to \$39 billion in 1932. Payrolls shrank as companies closed their doors and those that remained solvent operated with workforces that were significantly trimmed. Unemployment climbed, peaking in March 1933, when more than 15,000,000 Americans,

2 James P. Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism: Report of a Participant* (New York: Pioneer, 1944), 90–91; Cannon to Spector, 1 April 1929, Box 3, Folder 2, James P. Cannon Papers, Archives, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, MD 92–175, Madison, Wisconsin [hereafter JPC Papers]; Cannon to Dunne, 1 April 1929, reprinted as “Financing Our Publications,” in Fred Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928–31 – The Left Opposition in the U.S., 1928–31* (New York: Monad, 1981), 147. These dog days were of course an international phenomenon, with Trotskyists throughout the world facing extremely difficult and trying circumstances. This will be evident throughout this book, especially with respect to the European sections of the International Left Opposition. See, for a particularly detailed and illuminating account of the trials and tribulations of Trotskyists in China in these early 1930s years various sections of Gregor Benton, ed., *Prophets Unarmed: Chinese Trotskyists in Revolution, War, Jail, and the Return from Limbo* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2015).

or one out of three wage and salary earners, were jobless. In this catastrophic collapse, workers and their organizations came under attack, driven into cul-de-sacs of retrenchment and retreat.

The 1920s opened on the cresting wave of class struggle associated with the 1916–23 upheaval, born of the militancy fueled by socialist opposition to World War I and the enthusiasms generated by the 1917 Russian Revolution. For Cannon and other revolutionaries, the lessons of these years helped to consolidate communist politics and stimulated vital criticisms of syndicalism's limitations. As social democracy embraced national identifications, splitting the forces of the Second International, World War I also differentiated revolutionary internationalists from those left-wingers who chose 'country' over class. Even as the vitriolic Red Scare of this era drove resolute left-wing opponents of capitalism underground, labor mobilizations of the 1919–20 years signaled a new intensity of organization and resistance.³

Some five million workers were members of trade unions by 1920, a spectacular increase of almost 75 per cent in a decade. As a crude measure of militancy, moreover, the percentage of gainfully-employed workers involved in strikes over the course of the years 1903–29 reached a peak in 1920, at 5.4 per cent. More than four million workers undertook job action in 1919, but a decade later, in 1929, fewer than 300,000 Americans participated in such walkouts. As the number of strikes per annum fell from thousands to hundreds, with fewer and fewer job actions ending in anything approximating victory, unions found themselves on the defensive. Indeed, an aggressive labor movement that spawned claims of a "new unionism" and demands for "industrial democracy" in the combative 1919–20 era was brought to its knees by 1924, the victim of a virulent class war waged from above. The architects of this assault on trade unions were open-shop advocates in a revitalized employers' association movement and the capitalist state, operative at the national, regional, and local levels, whose many arms included courts, police forces, and militias. The number of organized workers in the United States fell to roughly 3.5 million by the mid-1920s and, in spite of labor force growth over the decade, this figure did not change significantly between 1924–29. Unionized workers in the industrial, as opposed to craft, sectors of the economy were particularly hard hit, with mining, textiles, and garment work suffering the largest losses. Craft unions, such as those in the building and printing trades, more than held their own, but their numbers were small relative to the industrial sectors; they largely lacked the

3 For Cannon and these years see Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 87–112.

presence of the revolutionary left that had, whatever its failures, provided an important haven in the class relations of the coal fields or the needle trades. As the 1920s closed, labor was in retreat. For all the gains registered in mass production with the arrival of the Fordist assembly line and the new industries of the second Industrial Revolution, few semi-skilled machine tenders and factory operatives were organized. Radical initiatives of an earlier World War I era infused class relations of the 1919–20 years with an insurrectionary quality that was as unprecedented as it was short-lived. In 1929, on the eve of the Great Depression, an increasingly ossified and conservative American Federation of Labor [AFL] constituted the mainstream of a trade union movement that was more reticent than radical.

When the bottom fell out of the capitalist economic order in October 1929 this situation, bad enough, worsened. The ranks of organized labor shrank by 470,000. Strikes declined in number to 637 in 1930, then rose only slightly to 810 in 1932 and 841 in 1933, annual figures less than those characteristic of the late 1920s. Many of these conflicts, moreover, were small, defensive skirmishes, called to roll back wage cuts, which had become endemic. By 1930–31 almost three million manufacturing workers were forced to accept reductions in their pay amounting to roughly ten per cent, while in bituminous and anthracite mining, cuts of nine-to-sixteen per cent were imposed on 325,000 workers. Among the AFL union leadership, the ideology of Gompersite voluntarism trapped the trade unions in an archaic and defeatist dog's breakfast of craft sectionalism, prudent respectability, and self-help. In 1930, AFL President William Green actually floated a proposal to corporate leaders that he would offer a no-strike pledge if their enterprises would agree not to cut wages. In June and July of that year Green got an impolite response: 60 businesses slashed rates of pay. Not until 1932, with starvation stalking the coal fields and Hoovervilles giving way to the organization of the jobless in Unemployed Citizen Leagues and the threat of the veterans' Bonus Army, did conservative craft unionism show signs of acknowledging the need to break the mold of atavism within which it was encased. Three years of unrelenting suffering and distress managed to move even the trade union tops in the AFL to a rhetoric of reform. "I say to you gentlemen, advisedly, that if something is not done ... the doors of revolt in this country are going to be thrown open," said one union spokesman to a Senate subcommittee in the spring of 1932. John Frey of the AFL's Metal Trades Department closed the year with bluntness, referring to the labor movement's lack of effectiveness: "We have been so 'good' that we have almost become no good."⁴

4 Quotes in the above paragraphs from Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the Amer-*

Left Oppositionists were critical of the trade union bureaucracy and cognizant of the need not to abandon those hundreds of thousands of workers incarcerated within established unions. As was apparent in the CLA's founding statement on trade unions, Cannon understood well the imperative of organizing the unorganized, forming new and more radical labor organizations if conditions and circumstances warranted, as well as engaging with the established trade unions so that they could be pushed past the enervating parameters of business unionism. Pioneer Hungarian Left Oppositionist, Pauline Gutringer, wrote to *The Militant* in 1930, deploring the nationalistic, labor aristocratic outlook of the AFL, which reduced unskilled labor to "rabble, an undesirable, disloyal element." With the circle of craft unionists shrinking and the numbers of unskilled, semi-skilled, and unorganized workers growing daily, Gutringer insisted it was up to the communist movement to organize all workers "under the banner of internationalism."⁵

Cannon and Swabeck did their utmost to feature trade union questions in their criticisms of the Lovestone leadership of the American Party, and they made some headway in what was left of the "Save the Union" movement, an opposition within the John L. Lewis-dominated United Mine Workers of America [UMWA]. This mobilization led to the formation of the National Miners' Union [NMU] in September 1928. Communist NMU militants battled the Lewis machine and, in the ensuing often violent confrontations, experienced firsthand the ugliness of union-hired goons and being fingered to the police by UMWA functionaries. Some of these miner militants were quick to protest the expulsion of Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman from the Workers (Communist) Party, and were repulsed by the gangsterism unleashed against them in the first months of 1929. Among those won to the Left Opposition, even if incompletely, were a trio of militants from the Illinois coalfields, Gerry Allard, Joseph Angelo, and George Voyzey.⁶

ican Worker, 1920–1933 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 354–355, a book that provides a useful overview of the early Depression years. For other sources drawn upon in the account presented in the above paragraphs see James R. Green, *The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980); Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step: Twenty Years of the CIO* (New York: Pioneer, 1964), 3–8; David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

5 "Nationalism and Internationalism," *The Militant*, 4 January 1930.

6 On this history see, among many possible sources, *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism: Selected Writings and Speeches, 1920–1928* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 1992), 544–558; Arne Swabeck, Unpublished, untitled, and unpaginated typescript, Chapter 11, Autobiographies File, Prometheus Research Library, New York,

Cannon campaigned within the Left Opposition to break from the sectarianism and opportunism of the Workers (Communist) Party, the consolidation of Stalinism in the 1924–28 years having led to a difficult to discern but nonetheless undeniable politics of oscillation. If the opportunism of the 1924–26 years, particularly around a series of Farmer-Labor Party fiascos in the United States, was the nursery of Cannon's original attraction to Trotskyism, sectarianism was an equally repugnant affliction, one that had plagued the American communist movement in its earliest years. Opportunism proved the decisive manifestation of Stalinism in the later 1920s, evident in the Communist International's approach to the British General Strike and the Chinese Revolution. But sectarian stands had preceded this rightward trajectory, and would indeed follow it. Cannon's political leap towards Trotskyism was premised on the necessity of revolutionary refusal of both opportunism and sectarianism. In his introduction to the first pamphlet published by the Communist League of America, components of Trotsky's *The Draft Program of the Communist International: A Criticism of Fundamentals*, Cannon accented the two-pronged nature of Trotsky's contribution. He stressed how Trotsky addressed American Communism's opportunism in his critique of the "exaggerated hopes and unbounded mistakes" associated with the misguided support given the LaFollette movement by the Workers' Party. Trotsky was praised by Cannon for having saved American communists from "disgrace and the direct threat to [their] existence contained in the proposal to support LaFollette." Nor was this Trotsky's only "exceptional service," for Cannon recalled that he had also taken a forceful stand against the sectarianism of an earlier stage in American communism's existence. "It was [Trotsky's] initiative," Cannon insisted, "which brought the assistance of the Communist International in 1922 to the task of liberating the Communist Party of America from the straight-jacket of illegality in which it had bound itself."⁷

New York; Edward P. Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 236–242. On the NMU and the Left Opposition see Statement of Springfield Workers (Communist) Party Mine Nucleus, 13 January 1929, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Arne Swabeck, "The Struggle in the Coal Fields," and "Miners Protest the Expulsions," *The Militant*, 1 February 1929; Swabeck, "The Illinois Miners Convention," *The Militant*, 15 April 1929; *Dog Days: James P. Cannon vs. Max Shachtman in the Communist League of America, 1931–1933* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 2002), 62–70.

- 7 For Farmer-Labor Party developments see Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 177–188, 227–239. See also James P. Cannon, "Introduction," in Leon Trotsky, *The Draft Program of the Communist International: A Criticism of Fundamentals* (New York: Militant, 1929), esp. ix.

Cannon translated these lessons into his attempt to establish principled working relations with “progressives” in the Brookwood Labor College/*Labor Age* milieu. Figures affiliated with this movement authored a 16-point manifesto challenging the AFL to organize industrial unions, extend trade union democracy, promote independent labor political action, and widen welfare entitlements. “These ‘progressives’ are weather-cocks who reflect certain winds blowing in the labor movement,” Cannon wrote. “Their emergence now with demands which connote militancy is an indicator of the radicalization of the workers growing within the old unions as well as in the ranks of the unorganized masses.” Cannon recognized that the ultimate role of such non-communist progressives would be to harness an incipient workers’ revolt and “head it off from any real collision with the capitalists and the AFL machine.” He insisted that the Left Opposition must engage in a united front with such forces, the better to move trade unionism forward and to expose the limitations of all reformist leaderships.

In contrast, Cannon’s old Kansas comrade, Earl Browder, now well situated to assume a leading role within American Stalinism, called for the Workers (Communist) Party to reject all “fake progressives.” In the mining sector, for instance, Browder claimed that such charlatans were misleading the ostensibly “tens of thousands of revolutionary miners who have nothing but contempt for such spineless quitters.” Cannon rejected such pompous bombast. He promoted communist trade union work that addressed realities rather than fictions. “The current practice of monopolizing the control of the new unions in a mechanical way, of regarding every worker who is not a Party member as a faker, of arbitrarily excluding relations and compromises with influential leaders who reflect the hazy development of masses of workers – this practice will be fatal.” The task for revolutionaries was to negotiate the difficult but principled terrain that was neither opportunistic nor sectarian.⁸

This call for a new and principled united front work in the labor movement constituted an important, if limited, intervention. It was linked with Left Opposition critiques of New York strikes of dressmakers and furriers in 1929, where the Lovestone leadership sheltered a clique of its factional “trade union experts” and obscured the ground lost to the Left Wing in the missteps of

8 Cannon, “The Communists and the ‘Progressives,’” *The Militant*, 1 March 1929. See also Cannon, “Our Conference and the Trade Unions,” *The Militant*, 1–15 May 1929; Arne Swabeck, “The New Progressive Movement,” *The Militant*, 1 August 1929. On the 16-point Progressive platform that Cannon is referring to see “The Challenge to Progressives: An Editorial Statement,” *Labor Age*, 8 (February 1929), 3–8.

the Needle Trades Industrial Union.⁹ Cannon's orientation combined revolutionary principles with realist assessments of concrete situations. It stood in stark contrast to the emerging bravado of Stalinism, in which sectarian isolations and exaggerated understandings of workers' appetites for class struggle predominated. Pressing the Communist Opposition to enter into "every movement of a progressive character in the trade unions" and "work loyally to advance it [and] ... the interests of the workers and their organizations" at the same time "fight[ing] and expos[ing] the fakers," criticizing "all reformist tendencies," building "independent Communist organization and influence," was a tall order indeed. "Our activity can not be confined to mere criticism," Cannon asserted. He called for "systematic activity of the Opposition Communists in the trade union movement along the lines of our policy."¹⁰

It was much easier said than done. 1929 closed with the defeat of the rebellious southern textile workers of the Piedmont. Where success was achieved it was modest, did not result in unionization, and was secured largely by hands who gave outside agitators a wide birth. When losses were sustained they were dramatic, and included struck textile mills reopened with scab labor, pitched battles that resulted in death, and courtroom charades that left workers convicted of second-degree murder and employer thugs guilty of killing, kidnapping, and Ku Klux Klan-type vigilantism untouched. Among those whose lives were lost in the orgy of anti-union violence was Ella May Wiggins, a poor working mother quick to make common cause with communists. A singer whose fame as "the minstrel of the strikers" was growing, Wiggins was shot in a roadway encounter of unionists and a mob of angry, gun-toting anti-strike vigilantes. The vanguard of conflict was the Communist National Textile Workers Union [NTWU], and the spark that ignited the fire of mill worker class struggle was the pivotal Loray works in Gaston County, North Carolina, with its labor force of 3500. Targeted by the Communist Party as the key to a southern organizing drive, the Loray Mill was organized over the first months of 1929 by a mercurial One Big Unionist turned Communist, Fred E. Beal. When the workers walked out on 1 April 1929 they probably had no idea how quickly the strike would move from a trade union struggle, turning on demands for better pay, improved conditions, and union recognition, into a political battle pitting Americanism against Communism. Soon the word spread that Gastonia was

9 See, for instance, "The New Needle Trades Workers' Union," *The Militant*, 15 January 1929; "After the Dress Strike," *The Militant*, 1 April 1929; "Summing Up the Fur Strike," *The Militant*, 15 August 1929; "The Coming Dress Strike: A Talk with Left-Wing Needle Trades Union Members," *The Militant*, 1 November 1929.

10 Cannon, "Our Conference and the Trade Unions," *The Militant*, 1–15 May 1929.

ablaze with “a revolt.” As the Party flooded North Carolina with organizers, key among them Cannon’s old friend, Bill Dunne, another Cannon confrère, Hugo Oehler, and the revolutionary couple Vera Buch and Albert Weisbord, the latter the head of the NTWU, the AFL denounced the strike and turned its back on the Loray workers. Weisbord ostensibly told Beal: “We must prepare the workers for the coming revolution.” To one liberal onlooker it appeared that the unfolding scene “had all the ear-marks of the propaganda kindergarten of the Third International.”¹¹

The Loray strike and its tragic, predictable denouement did make one point abundantly clear to the almost entirely northern ranks of the CLA. Nothing was more evident than that the Communist Party, for all of its sectarian errors, eclipsed its Communist League of America Opposition in the trade union field. The CLA was too small and too isolated to have a decisive impact in this vital arena, which was effectively closed to its influence. It remained, for all its aspirations to be something more, confined to the role of the critic.

Cannon did his best, through a clandestine correspondence with Party member Hugo Oehler (pseudonym John Young), to push communist activity in the Piedmont in new and fruitful directions. Oehler, a secret Left Oppositionist who attended the founding conference of the CLA in May 1929, was a talented organizer with a distinguished record as a trade union field operative responsible for District 10, a huge western territory centered in Kansas and encompassing nine other states, including Colorado, site of militant miner battles. Along with long-time Kansas Cannon supporter, A.A. ‘Shorty’ Buehler, Oehler cultivated Left Opposition support in the Kansas City branch of the Workers (Communist) Party. But he did not come out openly, and appeared, originally, to be firmly against the Left Opposition stand of Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman. He repudiated the “loudest supporters of Trotskyism” in Kansas, dismissing them as

11 On the Gastonia events see Fred E. Beal, *Proletarian Journey: New England, Gastonia, Moscow* (New York: Hillman-Culr, 1937); Bernstein, *Lean Years*, 1–43; Liston Pope, *Mill-hands and Preachers: A Study of Gastonia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1942); Vera Buch Weisbord, *A Radical Life* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1977); John A. Salmond, *Gastonia, 1929: The Story of the Loray Mill Strike* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); William F. Dunne, *Gastonia: Citadel of the Class Struggle in the New South* (New York: Workers Library, 1929); Albert Weisbord, “Passaic – New Bedford – North Carolina,” *The Communist*, 8 (June 1929), 319–323; Tom Tippet, *When Southern Labor Stirs* (New York: Jonathan Cape, 1931). Coverage in early copies of *The Militant* was quite extensive. See, for instance, “Gastonia,” 1 July 1929; “Gastonia in Danger,” 1 August 1929; “United Front for Gastonia: Fight the Frame-Up! Defend the Right to Organize and Strike!” 15 August 1929; “No Illusions on the Gastonia Trail,” 15 September 1929; “Lynch Law in Gastonia,” 1 October 1929; “The Massacre at Marion,” 15 October 1929; “Class Justice and Revenge in the South” and “Three Conferences for Defense of Gastonia,” 1 November 1929.

“some of the rww members of the yellow socialist party, pacifists, liberals, and a handful of anarchists.” As a member of the District Executive Committee No. 10 and District Organizer, Oehler polled previous Cannon group members to ascertain their loyalty to the Workers (Communist) Party and signed the Kansas Party statement denouncing Trotskyism that ended with the declaration, “Long Live the American Communist Party!” Oehler was thus well-situated to be a Left Opposition mole inside the Workers (Communist) Party and, as a selfless, peripatetic organizer, could be counted on to find his way, Wobbly-like, to eruptions of class struggle. Cannon counseled Oehler to remain in the Party, where he could have an impact far greater than he would as a public proponent of the Left Opposition. After the spring 1929 CLA founding conference, Oehler did not take long to turn up in Gastonia.¹²

Along with Bill Dunne and Weisbord, Oehler was soon heading the Communist Party work in North Carolina. He found support for his Left Opposition sentiments in George Saul, a lumbering left-winger also active in Kansas communist circles, well-known as a leader of a major Colorado coal miners’ strike, and a former International Labor Defense [ILD] functionary. Saul was dispatched to the North Carolina mill towns as a Party organizer, where his ownership of a car facilitated his movement among the textile communities of the Piedmont. This did not endear him to local authorities; Saul was arrested twice and slapped with a six-month sentence for inciting to riot. His public declaration of support for the Left Opposition, like that of Oehler, was delayed until June – July 1930, at which point he kept his distance from North Carolina, avoiding a term in jail, and instead embarked on a national CLA speaking tour that included talks on “Boss Persecution in the South.”

In 1929, Oehler, a genuine revolutionary who nevertheless harbored ultra-left instincts, was in many ways drawn to some of the excesses of “class against class” Third Period Stalinism, and was likely partially under the sway of Bill Dunne. Cannon tried to win Oehler more thoroughly over to the Left Opposition’s approach. He pointed out that the labor defense strategy of the Communist Party, embraced by both Oehler and Dunne, was a narrow, often sec-

12 “Kansas District Hits Trotskyism,” *Daily Worker*, 23 November 1928; Saul to Oehler, 22 November 1928, Reel 2D, Documents from Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Contemporary History, Microfilm copies held, Prometheus Research Library, New York, New York [hereafter, Russian Center, PRL]; *Dog Days: James P. Cannon vs Max Shachtman in the Communist League of America, 1931–1933* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 2002), 11. For much on Oehler, including Cannon’s insistence that Oehler had joined him as a Left Oppositionist “when we were expelled in 1928,” see Harry Ring interview with James Cannon, Unpublished Typescript in possession of the author, 8 March 1974 [hereafter Ring interview].

tarian evasion of the need to cultivate unity. It was also dangerously adventurist, asserting that it was legally the right of workers to arm themselves in self-defense against the bosses. Cannon pressed Oehler to do his best within Party circles to point out that it was ill-advised to "accept the theory which the other side is always striving to establish that the Communist leaders are responsible legally every time a policeman, scab or thug is shot in a fight during a labor struggle." This Cannon condemned: "Such criminal folly put forward as Communist tactics is enough to make the mind reel." Not only did it narrow the mobilization of opposition to the frame-ups in Gastonia, it largely abandoned those facing murder and other charges to the "southern reactionaries ... the policy of the party is very little protection." The entire orientation of the Party, according to Cannon, was a repudiation of decades of revolutionary work in the labor defense field: "from the Haymarket martyrs on, the prosecution has claimed and *the defense has denied* that others, particularly leaders, were criminally responsible for the killing of bosses' agents in a struggle. The Party today is abandoning this old, established and correct labor strategy for a new one at the expense of the prisoners and the movement." Cannon's critical words to Oehler fell largely on ears deafened by the ringing "class struggle" rhetoric of the Third Period. Yet he persevered in answering questions. His clandestine communications with Oehler tried to set his comrade straight on the Left Opposition's views on organizing new unions when necessary but not abandoning the workers in the established AFL organizations. Cannon pushed especially hard the view that the Party's "new line of ultra-radicalism is artificially forced on the Party membership and is bound to fail in the Party as well as in the class struggle." Educating cadre like Oehler and Saul, hoping against hope that Bill Dunne, with whom they were collaborating, could be won away from the wrong-headed ultra-leftism of the Third Period, Cannon was again the caretaker. He was also using the entire experience pedagogically to further consolidate the politics of the Left Opposition in a young Al Glotzer. "Have written at length on all points to Young," Cannon wrote Glotzer in late August 1929. "He is away off the track, but in a letter yesterday he agreed to push for our line in the question of the united front in organization and in defense. On the slogan 'self defense' I wrote a long letter, but have had no reply from him. It seems that he and Bill claim to be the sponsors for this adventuristic, social revolutionary slogan. That makes it bad, but I hope we can change him."¹³

13 On Oehler and Saul, all indications suggest that the former corresponded with Cannon in 1929 under the pseudonym Young about matters relating to Gastonia. See Communist League of America, National Executive Committee Minutes, 24 September 1929, Box 35, Folder 3; 13 April 1931, Box 35, Folder 5, George Breitman Papers, Tamiment Institute, Bobst

The CLA could, of course, still intervene in important, even material ways, albeit from afar. The Communist Party's International Labor Defense handling of the trial of 16 Loray Mill strikers, Beal among them, was less than an unmitigated success. The workers were charged with the murder of Police Chief Orville Aderholt in what was almost certainly a defensive shoot-out at the National Textile Workers Union hall. As the defense descended into ultra-left sectarianism, Cannon's worst-case scenario, suggested earlier to Oehler, seemed confirmed in practice. Potential supporters were alienated and driven away. The ILD narrowed the defense mobilization to the point that "it could not express the widespread sentiment of the working masses in favor of the defendants." Countering this, the Minneapolis CLA organized a Unity Conference for Gastonia Defense based on the premises of Cannon's 1920s labor defense work. *The Militant's* headlines screamed for the necessity of a "UNITED FRONT FOR GASTONIA" at the same time that those selling the Trotskyist newspaper were denied involvement in the ILD's efforts to defend Piedmont strikers and organ-

Library, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter GP Papers]; *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, 481, 571; Salmond, *Gastonia*, 94, 96, 103, 123, 126–127, 161; Weisbord, *A Radical Life*, 244, 252, 255–256, 266; Cannon to Young, 17 July 1929; 13 August 1929; 19 August 1929; Cannon to Glotzer, 24 August 1929, Box 3, File 2, JPC Papers; and an article on the TUEL Conference in Cleveland, written by Oehler under the Young pseudonym: James Young, "Cleveland and Unorganized Labor," *The Militant*, 1 October 1929. For Saul's early hounding by the Workers (Communist) Party: Saul to Oehler, 22 November 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; Saul to Gitlow, 30 November 1928, Reel 9, Russian Center, PRL. Saul came under scrutiny by the Lovestone leadership in November–December 1928, because he vacillated when pressured to endorse the expulsion of Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman (although he did in the end offer his reluctant agreement) and had been in contact with Cannon. He was likely suspended from his ILD and Party organizer posts, and was removed from teaching Party classes in Denver. But his suspension did not result in expulsion, largely because he indicated, as in his letter to Gitlow, that he was "Against Trotskyism, against harsh methods excepting in special cases, and trying to choose between the minority and the majority which of them has the correct line of march for the revolutionary vanguard." Saul, at this point, claimed that he "did not believe in the politics of the Opposition," and he rejected Trotsky's view that there was something "fundamentally wrong in the Soviet Union." As a left-winger, however, Saul was disturbed by the Lovestone regime's right-wing orientation, as well as its bureaucratic heavy-handedness. Reinstated in the Party, he was in Gastonia in the summer of 1929 and was in motion towards Trotskyism and joining the CLA. For Saul's endorsement of the Left Opposition see "The Mass Workers Join the Opposition! George J. Saul Also Demands That Party Reinstate Our Group," *The Militant*, 26 July 1930; "Carolina Demands Its Pound of Flesh," *The Militant*, 1 September 1930; "George Saul Tours for Opposition," *The Militant*, 15 September 1930. On Oehler's similar public statements see "Hugo Oehler Joins Opposition," *The Militant*, 21 June 1930; Oehler, "The Communists in the South: A Review and Criticism," *The Militant*, 12 July 1930; 26 July 1930; 15 August 1930; 1 September 1930.

izers. The CLA answered the Communist Party's muddles, yet it was well aware how dwarfed its positions were by its Stalinist counterparts. Assessing the 1929 AFL Convention in Toronto, Maurice Spector wrote tellingly of how, "The activities of the Communists in ... Gastonia have made a considerable impression on the more far-sighted circles of the possessing classes," and that even the seeming impermeable labor bureaucracy "had to conduct the necessary maneuvers to save its face" when confronted with "the lash of the Southern events" over recent months.¹⁴

2 'Left Turn': Revolutionary Politics and the Third Period

If the trade union front presented the CLA with a sobering picture of its limitations in 1929, the Communist International that prodded the original American Left Opposition into being was, at the same time, doing an about-face that would reverberate within the CPUSA. This would raise higher the walls Cannon and his comrades had to climb in order to escape their isolation. The Communist Party's role in the Loray strike and other events of 1929, for instance, bore all the trappings of trade union/labor defense work in the Third Period. Whispered about in 1928, with Stalinism consolidating its hold over the Communist International, a seeming left turn was ultimately proclaimed in 1929, at the Tenth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International [ECCI]. Capitalism's development over the course of the years 1917–29 was now differentiated. The revolutionary offensives of the World War I era constituted a first period of upheaval and accomplishment, shaking the global order, challenging capitalism, and bringing into being the first workers state in 1917. Then followed a second period, associated with the 1920s, in which capitalism achieved a "relative, partial, and temporary stabilization." By 1928–29, however, a third period was commencing. It was predicted that as mass radicalization of the working class unfolded and the proletariat went on the offensive, mounting militant strikes and mobilizing the unemployed to shake the House of Capital to its foundations, communists would reap the benefits. In this new and

14 See Maurice Spector, "The AFL Convention," and "Three Conferences for Defense of Gastonia," *The Militant*, 1 November 1929; "Minneapolis for Gastonia," *The Militant*, 30 November 1929. Among *The Militant* articles on the southern mill workers struggle see "Uniting the Textile Struggles," 1–15 May 1929; "Gastonia," 1 July 1929; "Gastonia in Danger," 1 August 1929; "United Front for Gastonia," 15 August 1929; "No Illusions on the Gastonia Trial," 15 November 1929; "Lynch Law in Gastonia," 1 October 1929; "The Massacre at Marion," 15 October 1929; "Class Justice and Revenge in the South," 1 November 1929; "Marion Killers Freed," 28 December 1929.

ultra-revolutionary Third Period, according to Stalin and his growing chorus of sycophants, the Communist Parties of the world alone were able to speak for and lead the masses of insurgent workers.¹⁵

The ramifications of this ostensibly “left turn” were obvious and would be played out around the world. Communists should lead all struggles and the only united fronts allowed were those constructed “from below,” in which the masses, not the “social fascists” in other left parties, were rallied to the standard of revolution. Regardless of the forum – trade unions, labor defense, or political activism – Third Period practices dictated that communists prepare the workers for revolutionary combat, eschewing common work and struggle with anyone unprepared to accept the leadership of the Communist Party. Progressives and non-communist workers’ leaders of all kinds, even rank-and-file members of existing unions, were written off as “yellow.” Class war prisoners could be defended only if they were affiliated with and subject to the guidance of the revolutionary vanguard. If overt fascism threatened, with the rise of Hitler and Mussolini in Europe, its inevitable fall would be followed by the victory of the revolutionary Communist Party. This, however, would happen only in so far as the CP refused alliances and coalitions with the fake progressives who were always standing in the shadows, cultivating illusion and marshalling the masses to defeat.

This sectarian program of isolating dead ends was seldom implemented in its pristine entirety, and there were always cracks in the wall of this abstract proclamation of official position. Few were the Communist Party cadre who could adhere, in the give and take of practical activity in the unions, among the unemployed, or on various political fronts, to this demand for revolutionary purity. Moreover, there were aspects of the Third Period’s relentless pursuit of the revolutionary road that registered advances. Especially in the United States, the slogan “class against class” was noteworthy in rallying to the Communists many militant workers who were tired of the class struggle abstentionism of AFL leaders or the withdrawal from the fray of industrial battle characteristic of so many “progressives.” The admonition to form “Red” unions in opposition to the bureaucratically orchestrated and timid labor movement mainstream broke decisively from opportunistic accommodations to trade union officialdoms. Throughout the mid-1920s, this was evident in a number of areas of Communist Party activity, including William Z. Foster’s approach to commun-

15 See, among other Comintern statements, “Theses and Resolutions: The International Situation and the Tasks of the Communist International,” *International Press Correspondence* (23 November 1928), 1567–1568; *The World Situation and Economic Struggle: Theses of the Tenth Plenum, ECCI* (London: Communist Party of Great Britain, 1929).

ist trade union work. As Third Period mobilizations exhibited militancy, the Party's willingness to fight for the most downtrodden among the unemployed raised significantly the profile of revolutionary communists and Third Period refusals to countenance white chauvinism garnered the CPUSA impressive support among African American workers. For all of these gains, however, the sectarianism of the late 1920s and early 1930s, combined with a capacity to wrench communists from reality, limited the Communist Party significantly at a time when its potential to intersect and influence the class struggle was greatest.

Maurice Spector, for instance, bemoaned the Third Period's illusions and its tendency to back communists into counter-productive reversals. "The slogan of 'class against class' as issued by the Comintern looks terribly radical," he wrote, but in reality it was little more than a sectarian abstraction in which the complexities of political life were reduced to the theorem that society outside "the industrial workers" was a "single reactionary mass." For the millions of workers "still in the fold of the social democracy," whose leaders "have not yet been unmasked," the Third Period promised further isolations and stagnation.¹⁶

The Third Period ultra-left turn thus squandered gains built up over years of communist activity in workers' organizations and elsewhere. It also proved a convenient mopping up of any possible opposition to Stalin within the Communist International, be it of the left or the right. American Trotskyists were targeted and vilified, conveniently situated in the alliance of social democracy and imperialism that was supposedly shoring up the flagging foundations of bourgeois rule on a global scale:

Trotskyism in the United States, as elsewhere, is a counter-revolutionary force. The social democrats know this. Trotskyism in American can be fought best by proving this to workers (and it is not difficult) and by calling on all honest but confused elements to break decisively with

16 Useful overviews of the Third Period in the United States include Michael Goldfield, "Recent Historiography of the Communist Party, USA," in Mike Davis, Fred Pfeil, and Michael Sprinker, eds., *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook, 1985* (London: Verso, 1985), 315–316; Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), esp. 3–166; and the documentary collection, Albert Fried, *Communism in America: A History in Documents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 93–226. On "social fascism" see Theodore Draper, "The Ghost of Social Fascism," *Commentary*, 47 (February 1969), 29–42; Sidney Hook, "The Fallacy of the Theory of Social Fascism," in Louis Filler, ed., *The Anxious Years: America in the 1930s – A Collection of Contemporary Writings* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1963), 319–337. At the time a useful critique was presented in Maurice Spector, "The Cult of the 'Third Period,'" *The Militant*, 15 September 1929; 1 October 1929.

the Trotskyist-Cannon grouping in the United States. Trotskyism in the United States, after its flare-up under the leadership of a group of renegades from the Communist Party who were tired of the struggle against the bourgeoisie, has been decisively rejected by the Communist workers. Nevertheless, a fight against Trotskyism is essential [as] a fight against a form of bourgeois corruption among the masses. The facts of life itself show that the line of Trotsky internationally and the line of Mr. J.P. Cannon, his henchman, is the line of attack upon the proletarian dictatorship and the Soviet Union, the line of struggle against the Communist International and its American section, and is therefore a line toward unity with the sinister forces of the social-democracy in precisely the period when world imperialism is gathering its forces for a new offensive against the Soviet Union and the world's working class – at a time when the social-democracy constitutes imperialism's chief bulwark against the rising tide of the class struggle in capitalist countries and the growing movements for national liberation in the colonial countries.¹⁷

This was heady stuff, reinforced by the theoretical claims of the Comintern's analytic historical abstractions, some of which seemed to soon be borne out in capitalism's late 1929 collapse.

Nonetheless, the arbitrary, deterministic designation of the mid-1920s as a period of capitalist stabilization, for instance, misrepresented much and exempted the ECCI from any responsibility for the programmatic disasters of the period, detailed in Trotsky's critique of the Comintern. As Spector noted in his two-part article on "The Cult of the 'Third Period'" in *The Militant*:

In the re-capitulation of the attributes of this 'second period', its architects conveniently 'forget' to mention the facts of the Chinese Revolution, the British General Strike, and the Viennese uprising. It is merely spoken of as a period of relative stabilization, defensive struggles of the workers, successful socialist construction in the USSR, growing political influence of the Communist Parties, and inner consolidation of the Comintern. Nine-tenths of this characterization is falsehood and the remaining tenth needs qualification. ... The history of the 'second period' was falsified to stifle discussion and prevent the heavy accounting that otherwise Stalin and Bucharin would have had to render.

17 "Trotsky Carries His Case to the Bourgeoisie," *Daily Worker*, 27 February 1929.

In its proclamation of a reversal of the rightist danger, the Stalinist Third Period program ostensibly outflanked the Left Opposition by adopting an ultra-left rhetoric of revolutionary confrontation. As Spector noted, the result was that “the leftward movement of the working class was monstrously exaggerated.” As Communist parties around the world, increasingly nothing more than “subsidized appointees of Stalin,” imitated “their master closely or follow[ed] out instructions implicitly,” the consequences were decidedly negative. In the United States these could be seen on the pages of class struggle defeats, such as “the isolation of the Party in the fight for Gastonia,” and in adventurist policies that undid years of patient and productive united front and trade union work through “playing with the idea of a new socialist trades and labor alliance of dual unions.”¹⁸

Stalin’s only serious competitor, Nikolai Bukharin, was now also undermined. Associated with the “right danger,” Bukharin was exposed by the Stalinist machine as having proclaimed the left turn to the Third Period at the Sixth Congress of the Communist International in inadequate ways. He failed to accent that the epoch of capitalist stabilization had come to an abrupt and decisive end and that a new era of “revolutionary upsurge” was unfolding. Bukharin also obscured the eminently Stalinist point that Social Democracy and Fascism were “not antipodes, they are twins,” thereby understating the struggle that had to be waged against all of those forces who gave “left cover” to fascism and shored up capitalism’s longevity. For Spector and other Left Oppositionists this “senseless confusion of social democracy and fascism” had to be repudiated, for it misrepresented the nature of the roles these respective opponents of communism played in ways that fed into potentially disastrous consequences for labor and the revolutionary left. Associated since 1925 with concessions to the *kulaks* and advice to the landed masses to “enrich yourselves,” Bukharin curried favor in the anti-Trotskyist climate of the later 1920s by opposing the Russian Opposition’s accent on the necessity of Soviet industrial development and the need to curb the acquisitive individualism inherent in peasant agriculture. With Trotsky and his Oppositionists sufficiently sidelined by 1928–29, Stalin, under pressures of peasant grain hoarding and the suffocating of industrial, urban productivity, could reverse his past practices, move decisively and brutally against the countryside, and back Bukharin into corners of capitulation from which he would never recover. By the time of the Communist International’s Sixth Congress in the summer

18 Maurice Spector, “The Cult of the ‘Third Period,’” *The Militant*, 15 September 1929; 1 October 1929.

of 1928, it was clear to all Stalinist insiders that Bukharin was falling from grace, but the campaign against him was still conducted by innuendo and corridor carping. After Bukharin's summary speech to the Sixth Congress, Stalin dropped the gloves. As the assault on Bukharin escalated into 1929, Soviet functionaries began to worry openly about catching his "political syphilis" and distanced themselves from the former Party favorite. The final *coup de grace* was delivered by Stalin in an April 1929 statement before the Russian Communist Party's Central Committee: "The misfortune of Bukharin's group is that it is living in the past, that it fails to see specific features of this new period and does not understand that new methods of struggle are needed. Hence its blindness, its bewilderment, its panic in the face of difficulties." This was a political death sentence. Within three months Bukharin would be prohibited from working within the Comintern that he had headed in the years 1926–29, stripped of positions of authority. Demoted to running the editorial offices of *Izvestia* in the mid-to-late 1930s, Bukharin was arrested in 1937. He was subsequently executed after one of the *pro-forma* Moscow purge trials of the period.¹⁹

As went Moscow and the Comintern, so went New York and the Communist Party, USA. Like Bukharin, with whom he was associated personally and politically, Lovestone was now a liability. This was abundantly clear as early as the March 1929 Sixth Convention of the American Party, where Stalin intervened in what should have been Lovestone's crowning as the monarch of United States Communism. At May 1929 American Commission meetings in Moscow the Foster vs. Lovestone forces had it out, and Stalin, while humiliating Foster, assailed the Lovestone majority and wrote *finis* to its leadership. Lovestone and some of his supporting cast (others were prepared to deal behind the

19 Among many possible sources see, for abbreviated discussions, Maurice Dobb, *Soviet Economic Development Since 1917* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 202–207; Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: Viking, 1960), 302–306; Draper, "Ghost of Social Fascism," 31–32. There is much on Trotsky-Bukharin-Stalin relations, and Bukharin's shifting orientations, in Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921–1929* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959) and in Leon Trotsky, *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence*, translated and edited by Alan Woods (London: Well Red Books, 2016). For a useful and succinct summary of this history see E.H. Carr, *Foundations of a Planned Economy, 1926–1929*, Volume 3, Part 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1976), esp. 193–258, which also contains an appendix on "Social Fascism," Volume 3, Part 2, 638–643. See also Albert Glotzer, *Trotsky: Memoir & Critique* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), 165–169; and Spector, "The Cult of the 'Third Period,'" *The Militant*, 15 September 1929; 1 October 1929.

scenes with Stalin) refused to bend the knee of supplication to the demand that they surrender “unconditionally” to Soviet authority. Stalin deplored the Lovestone leadership’s factionalism, likening its refusal to accept “an order from the Comintern ... to submit” while proclaiming its loyalty to the International to the duplicitous acts of a “pettifogging lawyer.” With the Lovestoneites speaking of their much-vaunted Majority within the CPUSA, Stalin put them in their place: “Who do you think you are? Trotsky defied me. Where is he? Zinoviev defied me. Where is he? Bukharin defied me. Where is he? And you! Who are you? Yes, you will go back to America. But when you get there, nobody will know you except your wives.”

Comparing the Lovestone rebels to scabs who refused to make common cause with union strikers, Stalin added menacingly, “for scabs there is plenty of room in our cemeteries.” Lovestone, never at a loss for the quick quip, dubbed Stalin’s tirade, “the graveyard speech.” Jokes, however, could not sustain Lovestone in his leadership position. Stalin managed, as well, to sideline the heir apparent, William Z. Foster, paving the way for the installation of Earl Browder as the CPUSA head. For some time those in the Foster-Cannon caucus expressed concern about becoming “Browderized,” meaning that they would be totally subordinated to “the leader.” Browder was historically Foster’s “direct assistant,” and “had no standing as a political leader and was not even thought about in that connection.” Yet Stalin understood well that, “a good housemaid can put even a cracked chamber pot to some use.” The American Party was about to be Browderized. As Shachtman later commented, “Browder was a manufactured person – not he alone, his similars in all the other Communist parties. As soon as the Russians decided that for this, that and the other reasons they didn’t want Browder, they just snapped their fingers and Browder disappeared. ... He was simply their invention. They appointed him and they disappointed him.”

Along with what remained of his loyal delegation, Lovestone arrived back in the United States in late June 1929 after what amounted to, in the eyes of Stalin and the Comintern, an “escape” from Soviet Russia, where the former CP majority head was ordered to remain. Within 48 hours, Lovestone was expelled from the American Party he helped to found, his fate sealed in the inevitable cable from Moscow. As the summer wound down, some 92 aligned factionalists were likewise banished from the ranks of American communism. In October 1929 those purged formed the Communist Party, USA (Majority Group), also known as the Communist Party Opposition, later renamed the Independent Labor League. Affiliated for the 1930s with the Bukharinite International Right Opposition, Lovestone’s group would eventually disband in 1940, and his political trajectory moved unwaveringly to the right. Lovestone cashed in on his

labor expertise, becoming in the post-World War II epoch of the Cold War an anti-communist AFL-CIO adviser and CIA collaborator.²⁰

The configuration of economic downturn and Comintern ultra-left turn dashed the hopes on which the Communist League of America (Opposition) was built. A collapsing economy stifled the immediate possibilities of class struggle. As the Left Opposition entered the 1930s, there were few opportunities to intervene directly in working-class mobilizations. Far from being chastened by the evident and decisive subordination of the CPUSA to the whims of Stalin's Communist International, the Third Period adventurist detour to the left convinced many rank-and-file communists that, in actuality, the Party, guided by the revolutionary hand of Stalin, was indeed righting past wrongs. Many inside the Party, who experienced first hand Lovestone's regime of intrigue and the hot-house atmosphere of rabid factionalism, saw his ouster as a sign that the demoralizing past of intra-party conflict was ended. Outside of communism itself, the growing ranks of disaffected workers, intellectuals, African Americans, women, and others – most of whom found it difficult to comprehend the fractured relations of the CPUSA and its now two (right and left) Oppositional groups – cast their lot with the larger, more influential, and obviously militant, major party. It was much easier to do this than to work through the hard lessons of what was what in the Soviet Union, the Communist International, and the divided ranks of American revolutionaries. "Reconciliation with Stalinism became the order of the day," Cannon later wrote. As the Great Depression worsened and disillusionment with the individualistic material order of the marketplace deepened, the illusions garnered in Stalinism's rejuvenation paid further dividends. New elements in the "tens and hundreds of thousands" began to look again, as they had in 1917, to the Soviet Union, seeing it as an alternative to the capitalism that "appeared to be going up the spout." Cannon

20 The above paragraphs draw on many sources. On Lovestone's expulsion see Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 377–444; Robert J. Alexander, *The Right Opposition: The Lovestoneites and the International Communist Opposition of the 1930s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1981); and Ted Morgan, *A Covert Life – Jay Lovestone: Communist, Anti-Communist, and Spymaster* (New York: Random House, 1999), esp. 84–118. The best source on Lovestone is now the compilation of documents and the introductions to them in Paul Le Blanc and Tim Davenport, eds., *The "American Exceptionalism" of Jay Lovestone and His Comrades, 1929–1940* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2018). On Stalin and Browder see Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess: The Truth About American Communism* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1940), 536–538; Bertram D. Wolfe, *A Life in Two Centuries* (New York: Stein and Day, 1981), 506–508; James P. Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism – Report of a Participant* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1962), 126–127, 211; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," Oral History Research Office, No. 488, Columbia University, 1963, 434.

found that the momentum built up from his Workers (Communist) Party expulsion in October 1928 to the founding of the CLA in May 1929, ground to a halt: "recruitment from the party suddenly stopped. ... Nobody wanted to listen to us. ... Walled off from the vanguard represented by the Communist movement and without contact with the living mass movement of the workers, we were thrown in upon ourselves."²¹

These were the dog days, and for Cannon they were lived out as a punishing and testing period. In the 1940s he would claim that this stretch constituted "the hardest days of all in the thirty years I have been active in the movement – those days from the conference of 1929 in Chicago until 1933, the years of ... isolation, with all the attendant difficulties."²² After the initial euphoria of declaring for Trotsky in 1928 and drawing to his cause a core of committed cadre, establishing an external opposition, publishing a paper, and mobilizing to win the Communist Party back to its original revolutionary principles, Cannon was, by the end of 1929, dispirited.

What Cannon neglected to address retrospectively was his own subjective role. Somewhat optimistic about the possibilities of Left Opposition growth *outside* the Communist Party in the period leading up to the formation of the CLA in May 1929, a combination of external factors and personal trials and tribulations soon dampened his enthusiasms. Under the pressure of a personal demoralization that was itself the culmination of a variety of depressing circumstances, Cannon soon turned away from an orientation that stressed the necessity of the CLA looking outside the ranks of the CPUSA. There were objective reasons why Cannon shifted gears on the tactical direction recruitment should take, and some of his rationale for turning "deeper into the Party" was valid. Cannon's position was never, for instance, to abandon the CLA's "independent activity," which he saw as complementing the protracted "fight for the Party."²³ On the one hand, this orientation seemed, as the summer of 1930 brought Party recruits to the Opposition such as Hugo Oehler, George Saul, Sylvia Bleeker, Morris Lewit, Springfield, Illinois-based former NMU head, John J. Watt, and groupings of New York City Young Communist Leaguers, to be serving the CLA well.²⁴ On the other hand, the Party orientation was often interpreted by a contingent of youthful critics of Cannon as unduly cautious and

21 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 90–93; *Dog Days*, 30–33; Max Shachtman, "25 Years of American Trotskyism," *New Internationalist*, 20 (January – February 1954), 13–14.

22 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 95.

23 Cannon, "Deeper into the Party!" *The Militant*, 26 July 1930.

24 See, for instance, "New Party Forces continue to Join the Communist Opposition," *The Militant*, 12 July 1930; "NY Party-YCL Group for Opposition," *The Militant*, 28 June 1930.

conservative. There is no doubt that in its prudent charting of the CLA course, it was influenced by Cannon's deteriorating personal circumstances.

3 Dimensions of Cannon's Crisis: Material Being

The leading elements of the CLA could not step outside of their environmentally-determined material skins. Professional revolutionaries like Cannon, Abern, and Shachtman were paid Party functionaries, and their livelihoods, dependent on their loyalty to the Communist International, ended in October 1928. No comparable political movement on the revolutionary left had managed to do as much as the CLA – recruit members, publish a newspaper, translate documents, undertake a publication program of pamphlets, hold regular public forums as well as the occasional social or benefit event, process extensive correspondence – in so short a time and with so little in the way of resources. That all of this was done in a period leading up to and extending into the worst economic crisis in the history of modern capitalism was, to put it simply, astounding.

There was, however, no denying the extent to which the material context in which the Communist League of America (Opposition) was founded produced problems for the new movement: "The economic crisis had played no little role in causing some demoralization in certain sections of the League," wrote Glotzer in a report on a national tour he undertook in February – March 1932. Invaluable CLA members often had to uproot themselves for economic reasons, moving away from their comrades and political work just to be able to survive. Glotzer wrote Shachtman in November 1932 to note how troubled he was that two pivotal members of the Chicago branch were about to relocate: "They are more or less destitute economically and it's a case of starving or going up to Michigan to live and avoid an ignominious death. ... You can imagine what a blow this will be to the group."²⁵

As the extensive archive of correspondence of early American Trotskyism establishes, the Left Opposition was born destitute. Paying the printer's bill was always an act of imagination and creativity. Asking Spector when Toronto was going to be sending some money New York's way, Cannon bemoaned "the frank desperation of poverty," and complained of being "harassed by printers who have no poetry in their soul." "I suppose you know the frightful financial

25 Albert Glotzer, "Report on National Tour," 11 April 1932, in *Dog Days*, 197; Glotzer to Shachtman, 2 November 1932, Roll 10, Reel 3353, Max Shachtman Papers, Tamiment Institute, Bobst Library, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter MS Papers].

jam we're in just now," Shachtman wrote to Glotzer in early 1929. "The printer raised a lovely squawk about jack and we haven't been able to give it to him, with the result that *The Militant* is being delayed, not to speak of three or four pamphlets that are all ready to be set up."

Often the New York branch of the CLA resorted to a "revolving rent fund," in which comrades with money put aside for their bi-weekly or monthly housing costs would turn it over to the office to pay a pressing bill. They knew that they could stall a landlord for a week, at which point another comrade would pass rent money over to the delinquent tenant, and the process would begin anew. Keeping up an office was often an expense the Left Opposition/CLA simply could not manage. Swabeck resorted to bouncing cheques, which bought him a little time to scrounge up some needed cash. He recounted how a deaf-mute linotype operator regaled young comrades with animated mimicry conveying clearly what he thought the credit of the CLA, and its patented rubber cheque, was worth. After years of sustaining the Left Opposition National Office on a shoestring, Swabeck sounded almost resigned to being unable to pay the rent, facing the consequences stoically. He wrote to Cannon in August 1933, outlining how the landlord was pressing him for rent: "We had nothing for him, so he says it will be a dispossess notice. Not knowing just what the general sentiment is toward default and moving I asked him to hold over until after Tuesday's meeting. He was willing. Now I understand that the general sentiment is to let the place go and be thrown out. O.K."

Cash was always scarce in the League because paid jobs outside of the CLA were hard to come by, and regarded as a last, desperate resort. Shachtman and Abern relied on employed wives and, in Shachtman's case, the largesse of family, who provided at least the possibility of a good feed once a week. Even allowing for his irrepressible humor, Shachtman's August 1929 letter to Glotzer addressed the tightening constraints of economic hard times, conveying something of how difficult the situation for the CLA was:

I'm getting bloody well fed up with New York, as the dear old English would say. The air is lousy, the movement is lousy, the girls are lousy, and money is non-existent. After two weeks of job-hunting I've finally landed a job as 'production manager' – no less! – in a printing shop. Unfortunately, the job doesn't begin until after Labor Day, which means two more weeks of hand to mouth existence, and sometimes the hand never reaches the palpitating mouth. Thank Jesus that Billy is working. Her wages just barely suffice to pay the rent and an occasional corned beef sandwich. It's just hell.

"Send money for Christ's sake," Shachtman wrote two weeks later.

Cannon's correspondence was less chatty, but it too conveyed a sense of cursed poverty. "Chicago shoots better with lead bullets than with silver ones," he wrote to Glotzer in July 1929, trying to squeeze a little more in the way of financial contributions from the Windy City comrades. The refrain was always the same: "economic exhaustion is our worst difficulty." For the period following the May 1929 convention, according to Shachtman, Cannon was the only CLA leader drawing a wage, but for a variety of reasons, the movement's pre-eminent American figure was feeling the economic pinch more acutely than other Left Oppositionists. In any case, even Shachtman admitted that there were weeks when Cannon received no pay simply because the League's coffers were empty. And in the period leading up to the 1929 conference, the Left Opposition cupboard was almost always bare. "Our personal economic situation is becoming altogether impossible," Cannon confessed to Glotzer as early as February 1929.²⁶

Money ranked quite low on Cannon's personal scale of priorities. It was never for himself that he worried about its unavailability. As 1929 unfolded, however, he found the pressures of poverty, exacerbated by family distress, closing in on him in ways far more threatening than he had ever experienced before. Given the economic and political difficulties he faced as an ostracized opponent of imperialist war in the 1914–17 years, this was saying something. As in the earlier period, Cannon's poor circumstances, material as well as familial and psychological, culminated in a personal crisis that led to a brief period of partial political withdrawal and retreat.²⁷

26 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 98–99; Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialist's Odyssey Through the "American Century"* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), 55–56; Swabeck, Unpublished manuscript, "Autobiographies File," Prometheus Research Library, quoted in *Dog Days*, 33–34; Cannon to Spector, 20 December 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; Cannon to Glotzer, 20 February 1929; 20 April 1929; 26 June 1929; 9 July 1929, Box 3, File 2, JPC Papers; Swabeck to Cannon, 7 August 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Shachtman to Glotzer, 20 February 1929; 15 August 1929; 11 September 1929, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Fred Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928–31 – The Left Opposition in the U.S., 1928–31* (New York: Monad Press, 1981), 126–129. Shachtman's claim that Cannon was paid \$35 weekly could well have been an exaggeration. The information was conveyed to Glotzer in a decidedly factional communication meant to denigrate Cannon in the eyes of his former supporter. Moreover, this figure far exceeded the stipends paid to CLA functionaries in the future, which were in the \$15–\$25 range. In any case, the actual time period in which Cannon could have received this stipend was approximately three months, from May – August 1929.

27 For an exaggerated statement of Cannon's dire material circumstances during World War I

4 **Dimensions of Cannon's Crisis: Reconstituted Families and Domestic Complications**

Jim Cannon's domestic life was complicated throughout the 1920s. His marriage to Lista Makimson ended in 1923, and Cannon and Rose Karsner established a life-long, if often tempestuous, relationship as a loving couple whose commitment to each other was sealed in their embrace of revolutionary politics. Cannon's peripatetic life as a revolutionary left little time for him to spend with his two children, Carl and Ruth, born in 1914 and 1917, and Rose and her daughter, Walta, were similarly often separated from one another. As the deadening factionalism of the Workers (Communist) Party worsened under Lovestone's leadership in 1928, with Cannon and Karsner not yet enlightened by an understanding of the politics of Trotsky's critique and the alternative of a Left Opposition, all indications are that Jim and Rose had decided to rebuild their lives with their three children. They relocated to New York City to facilitate this. Sharing a large apartment with their friends Bill and Margaret Dunne, Jim and Rose were somewhat resigned politically but dedicated to putting their personal lives on a more satisfactory footing. No sooner had they taken this step than Cannon was thrust into the role of leading the Left Opposition in America. Cannon's and Karsner's lives were once more a whirlwind of political uncertainty, the strains and tensions exacerbated by their descent into a black hole of impoverishment. The situation was bad enough without the loss of Party friends and associates, with Bill Dunne first on the list. Such personal estrangements only worsened things. "We were good friends and boon companions all the time," Cannon later commented, "and the separation in 1928 left an emotional wound that never healed. ... Revolutionary politics takes a lot out of people who take it seriously." For Cannon, the loss of Bill Dunne was a reflection that the political was also inevitably personal.²⁸

Cannon's relations with Lista, Carl, and Ruth, and his life with Rose Karsner and Walta seemed to mesh well for much of the 1920s. There is no indication that the two families did not blend together positively and, indeed, undertake

see Joe Hansen, "How the Trotskyists Went to Jail: Rosedale and World War I," *Fourth International*, 5 (February 1944), 44. A more sober assessment appears in Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 78-80.

28 Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 187-188. For a discussion of Cannon's family life in the 1920s, touched on in the above paragraph and immediately below, see Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 195, 233-235, 314-315.

childcare on something of a cooperative basis. Lista's good-natured response to the pressures Cannon and Karsner faced as revolutionaries, especially in terms of their constant travels and relocations, was no doubt the glue that held the dual functioning of the families together. As an employed teacher, moreover, she carried the burden of financially supporting Carl and Ruth and being the custodial parent with whom they spent most of their time at her Island Park, Long Island home. Her role as the main, if not sole, provider for the children was somewhat curtailed when she developed heart problems that restricted her capacity to work outside the home. When Lista established a relationship with another teacher, Tilden Collor, new tensions were added to the mix, not the least those associated with the likelihood that he was assuming some financial responsibility for the Cannon children. Lista nevertheless did her utmost to keep things on an even keel, facilitating Jim's relationships with his children. Walta's father, David Karsner, and his second wife, Rose's friend Esther Eber-son Karsner, were also helpful, accommodating, and warmly integrated into domestic routines.

That said, in the immediate context of 1928–29 all evidence suggests that Cannon had fallen into an old pattern, whereby the pressures of revolutionary politics once again caused his absence from Carl's and Ruth's lives, even a separation from Lista, with whom he fell out of contact. Writing plaintively to Lista on 19 April 1929, Cannon was obviously distressed at the turn his life had taken away from his children:

I wish you would drop me a line and let me know how things are going, or else phone me if you are working so that I can meet you after School. I went down to the house on 18th Street, but was told that you had moved a short time before. Things are still poor with me as far as money is concerned. I would like to take the children to the circus someday as soon as I get a dollar or two to spare. I am going to get Ruthie a birthday present. I might bring it out there myself if you will give me directions how to come.²⁹

29 JPC to Lista, 19 April 1929, Reel 3, JPC Papers. There is a warm fragment of a letter from Lista, likely to Jim, from this period, but undoubtedly earlier than his quoted communication. See Lista Makimson, undated, Reel 14, JPC Papers. Such information as it is possible to glean on Cannon's domestic life in these years is culled from Bryan Palmer interview with Walta Ross and Marshall Ross, Del Mar, California, 18 April 1996; Palmer interview with Milt Zaslow (Mike Bartel), Solana Beach, California, 19 April 1996; Emily Turnbull, "What Walta Ross Knew of Jim and Rose's Families," Typescript, 29 November 1993, Prometheus Research Library, New York, New York.

The letter was destined to go unanswered. Lista, her physical ailments worsening, succumbed to a heart attack before she was able to pen a reply.

Lista's death brought to the forefront an overlapping series of challenging and disturbing difficulties that Cannon was increasingly unable to bring to a satisfactory resolution. The personal problems Cannon faced in 1929–31 must have seemed insurmountable: how to care for his children; how to function in the midst of a debilitating break-down suffered by his lover and closest collaborator, Rose Karsner; and how to make ends meet. When these personal matters fed into political crises within the CLA, Cannon's revolutionary resolve was tested and questioned. If he did not always handle matters in the best of ways, Cannon nonetheless managed to keep both his revolutionary perspective and his commitment to the cause of the Left Opposition alive.

The immediate matter that demanded addressing, and this in the midst of Cannon's involvement in the organization of the Left Opposition's first National Conference, was what Jim and Rose were going to do given that Carl's and Ruth's mother was dead. To do anything required money, a commodity in exceedingly short supply in the Cannon-Karsner household. Jim wrote to his sisters Mary and Agnes, as well as his brother Phil, pleading for financial help. None of them were in a position to send anything, except Phil, who worked as the General Manager of the Tulsa Club in Oklahoma. To his credit, Phil had shouldered almost the entire financial responsibility for the support of his, and Jim's, father. But Phil, something of Cannon's antithesis, was also a man on the make, a wheeler-dealer who had "spent lots of time and money in working out propositions," and was currently on the brink of a "gigantic deal ... a nation-wide proposition" that would "make my fortune and enable me to help you and Agnes and Dad and all those I love." Unfortunately for Cannon, his younger, dream-driven brother, for all of his financial playmaking (which, of course, would come to naught), couldn't quite scrape together \$25, which he had originally promised to send to his troubled brother. Instead he complained of debt. The burdens of middle-class trappings Phil was obliged to spend his money on apparently wore heavily on him: "[M]y position demands that I wear good clothes, that my wife and children dress well too, that I live in a nice house and in a nice neighborhood and drive a car, all of which eats heavily in your income." Uninformed about the nature of Cannon's politics, Phil only knew that his revolutionary sibling was no longer a paid functionary of the movement. He offered him the counsel of bourgeois individualism: "It seems to me Jim, and I say this without the least malice, that you have been treated rather badly, it has been nothing but one continual sacrifice for you since you were 18 years old, and not only have you sacrificed yourself and your family and your friends and your opportunities to get ahead."

Sister Mary, her Catholicism showing, offered prayers, wishes that Jim could be closer to Kansas City so that she could provide more in the way of support, urged him to “give all your thots to your family,” and asked him to “kiss the babies” for her. A left-leaning lawyer, whom Cannon knew well from his ILD days, came up with a loan that he was gracious in suggesting need not be paid back on any rigidly-established schedule. In the end, Cannon’s appeals to family and friends netted him only enough to stave off the rent collector for a few months at most. His plans to accumulate a sufficient nest egg to allow his children to live with him sank in the rough seas of 1929–30’s depressed economy. Collor, in the immediate aftermath of his wife’s death, did little to help, which was perhaps not all that surprising given the history of Cannon’s somewhat spotty relationship with his children and the political gulf that no doubt separated Lista’s first and second husbands. When Rose and Jim requested in the summer of 1929 that the children live with them in New York City, Collar rebuffed the proposal. The two revolutionaries then actually moved from the Lower East Side to Island Park, Long Island, in part to be near Ruth and Carl. Collar promptly whisked the kids off to Kansas City for a time, to be with Lista’s family, where Jim was held in particularly low regard and Rose was typecast as “the other woman.” Things were not looking particularly auspicious.³⁰

The family correspondence that Cannon initiated in May 1929 reconnected him to his Kansas roots and, through his aged father, established a link to Cannon’s half-brother Jack. Born in Kansas City, and raised in England after Jim’s step-mother left Cannon’s father and returned to her homeland, Jack was a bronze and iron draughtsman and designer who worked for architectural firms and managed, for a time, to land a job in early-Depression Montreal before battling, like so many others, unemployment. He visited Jim and Rose in May 1929, and again in December of that same year, spending time with Carl and Ruth. Over the course of Cannon’s difficult renegotiation of his relations with his children, Jack was a source of support and, especially in the case of Carl, established something of a rapport, inviting his nephew to Montreal. Jack, his half-brother Phil, and Phil’s wife Mona, spent two weeks in New York in August 1930, with Cannon showing them the town, taking in East Side restaurants, McSorley’s tavern, and seeing the sights with David and Esther Karsner.

30 The above paragraphs draw on Mary to My Dear Jim, 2 May 1929; Samuel Shur to My Dear Cannon, 3 May 1929; Agnes to Dear Jim, 7 May 1929, with undated enclosure Aunt Agnes to Dear Jim; Phil to Dear Jim, 8 May 1929; Phil to Dear Jim, 4 June 1929, all in Box 3, File 2, JPC Papers; Turnbull, “What Walta Ross Knew of Jim’s and Rose’s Families”; Harry Ring interview with James P. Cannon, 13 February 1974, 21, in possession of the author [hereafter Ring interview].

Jim obviously impressed the out-of-town guests, as did Rose, who was able to send her sister-in-law an autographed copy of one of Theodore Dreiser's novels, Karsner having established relations with Dreiser in 1928. Cannon's cosmopolitanism was showing through to his Kansas relatives, but the correspondence betrays no hint of his life within the CLA, mention of comrades or political work being almost entirely absent. Rather, when Cannon did address the issue of politics, it was in the context of his dire circumstances: expelled from the Party, Cannon stressed to relatives that he now lacked a secure livelihood. On a more up-beat note, Cannon claimed to be writing a book about, among other things, Rosedale.

The ongoing priority, however, was one of Carl's and Ruth's relations, or lack, with Rose and Jim. In this period, Tilden Collor moved with the children to New York, and Carl and Ruth began spending more time with Jim, Rose and Walta. Summer months were always spent at camps, or boarding at inns outside the state, and money needed to be sent. Eventually, Ruth, a strong-willed adolescent with far more interest in her father's and stepmother's politics than her brother, would move in with Cannon and Karsner, but Carl, older and obviously more resentful of Cannon's absences from his life, presented at first a much more difficult case. After talks with his uncles, he would apparently agree to live with his father, but would then backslide. Such correspondence as does exist from this period suggests a teenager interested, understandably, in his own needs: money to pay for various expenses associated with camp, fares to Long Island, and boarding costs; recounts of his exploits in various swim meets and training exercises; and apologies for losing Cannon's address and sending his requests to *The Militant*. Ruth, in contrast, was more clearly her Daddy's girl and, aside from her well-wishes to the Kansas clan, clearly had a spot in her heart for Uncle Tommy, almost certainly Cannon's old comrade and drinking companion, T.J. O'Flaherty. Having imbibed early from the Cannon-Karsner labor defense well, she wrote to her father from an Arden, Delaware summer sojourn at the Spreading Oak Inn. She was corresponding with Maurice [Malkin], an early CLAer and class-war prisoner, who was sending her and Walta necklaces from the penitentiary. Malkin was suffering eye trouble in prison. "Could you write to the prison and make them treat his eyes?" the thirteen-year old pleaded to her Dad, "He cannot obtain any treatment at all. Isn't that horrid." At the end of 1930 Cannon and Karsner moved back to New York, and Ruth and Walta were apparently living with them, with the prospects of Carl joining them seemingly better. Jack wrote to Jim that he was "glad to hear Ruthie is with you now and shall be more delighted when Carl is also with you. That's as it should be and all of you will feel the beneficial affect." Walta, meanwhile, had been diagnosed with some "suspected spinal

troubles.” The Cannon-Karsner household couldn’t seem to catch any luck. “Are things breaking any better?” Phil inquired in October 1930. As ever, he was working on “several propositions.” By the summer of 1933, the Cannon children – now a young man of nineteen and a young woman of seventeen – seemed to have settled into something approximating normal relations with Jim and Rose. Characterized by love and regard, the road to these new family bonds was a long and difficult one, in which Carl’s coolness and distance and Ruth’s warm but stubbornly self-absorbed streak created many a bumpy ride.³¹

5 Dimensions of Cannon’s Crisis: Rose Karsner’s Break-Down

As Cannon worked on solidifying his relations with his children in the aftermath of their mother’s death, Rose Karsner suffered what was described in family correspondence as “a break-down.” Often bed-ridden, Rose’s collapse was related to the tensions and strains that emerged in the aftermath of Cannon’s, Abern’s, and Shachtman’s October 1928 expulsion. She was, for instance, confined to the Cannon-Karsner residence for several weeks in November – December 1928, leaving the apartment only once to attend the first meeting of the Left Opposition. All indications are that Rose took the “break from old and intimate friends” exceedingly hard, this isolating aspect of the Left Opposition hitting her with more force than it did her male counterparts.

Cannon wrote to Glotzer on 20 December 1928 that, “Rose is with us but is ill, and you will hear about her a little later.” Rose was not much in evidence as the American Left Opposition formed and transformed itself into the CLA. Indeed, she is largely absent from the record of early United States Trotskyism, even in a secretarial sense, and Karsner left only very light traces of her

31 The above paragraphs draw on Jack to My Brother Jim, 5 January 1929, 4 May 1929, 12 June 1929, 1 September 1929, 2 December 1929, 26 December 1929, all in Box 3, File 2, JPC Papers; Jack to Jim, 15 February 1930, 30 March 1930, 29 April 1930, 1 September 1930, 2 December 1930, 31 August 1931, 20 September 1931, 20 November 1931; Phil to Jim, 2 September 1930, Phil to Jim and Rose, 20 October 1930; Carl to Daddy, 30 June 1930; Carl to Daddy, 5 July 1930; Ruth to Dear Daddy, 24 July 1930; and Carl to Dad, 19 August 1931, all in Box 3, File 3, JPC Papers; Mona to Dearest Rose, 9 March 1931, Box 3, File 4, JPC Papers; Ruth to Daddy Long-Legs, 6 August 1933; Ruth to Dad, 1 September 1933; Carl to Daddy, 11 August 1933; John Cannon to My Dear Son, 21 January 1932, Agnes to My Dear Brother Jim, 29 April 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Theodore Dreiser to Rose Karsner, 19 September 1928; 27 September 1928, Reel 61, Rose Karsner Cannon Papers, in JPC Papers; Sam Gordon in Les Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him: By Thirty-Three Comrades, Friends, and Relatives* (New York: Pathfinder, 1976), 56. For a warmer recollection of his father, drawn from memories of when he was five or six, see Carl Cannon in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 46–47.

presence in the entirety of the movement's 1928–29 beginnings. Her expulsion from the Communist Party was not recorded until May 1929, almost certainly as a consequence of Karsner's signature being appended to a letter, co-signed by Cannon and Shachtman, addressed to the International Labor Defense and calling attention to failures on the part of the supposedly non-partisan body.³²

One part of this distance from the functioning of the early Left Opposition was that in order to put food on the table and pay the rent Karsner teamed up, early in 1929, with Esther Karsner and another woman, Michelle Chargin. They established Playday House, a Washington Heights pre-school that aimed to prepare youngsters for their entrée into primary education through play, storytelling, arts and crafts, and Montessori teaching. The undertaking also sought to "solve the mother's vexing problems and provide her leisure in which to expand her personality." The crèche did not last long, and when Cannon began to correspond with Kansas family members in May 1929 a part of what he was telling them, aside from the sad news of Lista's death, was about Rose's continuing ill-health. "I am so sorry to hear of Rose not being well," one relative wrote back, "I know so much about what a break-down means and how hard it is to come back." She signed off, "I am trusting Rose is stronger, loads of love from your sister, Mary."

As late as 1933, with Cannon's father quite ill and under a nurse's care, Kansas relatives were inquiring as to the state of Rose's health. Within the Left Opposition itself, Karsner's health problems, obvious in retrospect, were never discussed openly. Even Sam Gordon, who lived with Rose and Jim, could do no more than pose the issue cryptically. Referring to the 1930–31 period, in which he first got to know Rose, Gordon commented: "She had been ill and only slowly returned to activity." Obviously battling depression, Rose found the isolation of the Left Opposition, the grinding poverty associated with Trotskyism's marginality, and the deteriorating context of the family life that she and Jim were able to piece together, difficult to the point of being debilitating. Suffering from respiratory problems since adolescence, she also needed some respite from the Lower East Side's congested streets, draughty cold-water flats, and polluted air. No doubt Cannon and Karsner moved to Long Island in the summer of 1929 to try to consolidate relations with Ruth and Carl, but they also did so, according to Shachtman, "because of Rose's health."

It was poverty that stalked the household of five most menacingly. Cannon would later recall with bitterness how, in 1930, he and Rose, unable to pay the

32 Cannon, Shachtman, and Karsner, "A Letter to International Labor Defense," *The Militant*, 1–15 May 1929.

rent, were forced to knock on doors trying to “bum a place to sleep for the night.” Economic pressures were alleviated somewhat by a younger comrade, Sam Gordon, moving into the Cannon-Karsner household, where he helped with the bill payments. If, by 1931, Rose brought herself out of the break-down, recovering to the point that she could actively involve herself in the business administration of the New York Left Opposition offices and *The Militant*, contributing to the politics of the CLA, the Cannon-Karsner domestic unit stared routinely into the economic abyss. This precariousness could not help but have adverse effects on personal relations. Cannon confessed to close comrades at the end of March 1933: “I am having a hell of a time here with financial problems at the office and double ones at home.” Weeks later, Rose wrote to Jim, attending a Chicago Conference of the Tom Mooney Molders’ Defense Committee, that their personal finances were exhausted, and that she was forced to beg \$5.00 from David Karsner. “I stalled off the rent man,” she reported, “but I can’t say for just how long.” A week later “the dispossession notice” came. “I have not yet decided what to do,” Rose wrote, “But I’ll take care of it. I am glad you are not here as I am sure you could not stand it in the condition you were in.”³³

The economic difficulties that plagued Cannon throughout the dog days of 1929–33, and Rose’s health, were thus seldom separable from the perpetual impoverished state of the Left Opposition, Rose also begging Jim to try to raise some money for *The Militant* in Chicago: “[The printer] refuses to set the next issue and has given us a summons again.” By 1933, Rose, having consolidated her position within the CLA, was apparently able to tolerate extreme deprivations, now routine. Just how the personal and the political, in the context of dire poverty and sacrifice, affected the Cannon-Karsner household was revealed starkly in a 29 May 1933 letter from Rose to Jim. With Cannon away for five weeks, engaged in various CLA activities in Chicago and Gillespie, Illinois, Kansas City, Minneapolis, and elsewhere Rose could not scrape together the rent. She wired Cannon out of desperation. He managed to raise \$25, but this left a deficit of \$22.50, and the landlord was demanding payment by 1 June 1933. In addition, Rose turned to Dave Karsner, who provided her with \$50, that she

33 The above paragraphs draw on “A Burglary – Its Political Meaning,” *The Militant*, 1 January 1929; “The Expelled,” *The Militant*, 1–15 May 1929; Evelyn Reed, Typescript, “Rose Interview,” 5, and “PlayDay House,” Leaflet, both in Reel 61, Rose Karsner Papers in JPC Papers; “For an Open Policy,” in Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928–31*, 78; Sam Gordon, in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 57–58; Cannon to Swabeck, 19 February 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Mary to My Dear Jim, 2 May 1929; Agnes to Dear Jim, 7 May 1929, Box 3, File 2, JPC Papers; Rose to Jim, 3 May 1933 and 9 May 1933; Agnes to Jim, 29 April 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Shachtman to Glotzer, 11 September 1929, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Cannon to Comrades, “We Have Made Some Errors,” 27 March 1933, in *Dog Days*, 493.

then “loaned” to the office so that an issue of *The Militant* would not be shut down by the printer. Throughout all of this she was drawing a dollar here and there from office funds for food, but now needed Cannon to send money as there was “absolutely no chance of my raising personally another cent from my own resources.” Family food, milk bills, light and gas expenses were all piling up, and Rose debated with herself about putting the furniture in storage since she could not “keep up the apartment” and thought it possible she would have to “get out before [Cannon’s] return. We will have to find a place somewhere.” All of this meant that “Carl and Ruth would have to go to Tilden [Collor],” and Cannon would have no home upon his return. To stave off this obviously unsatisfactory outcome Rose “poured all of Walta’s money into the household. But now there is not a cent left and no way of getting any.” Assuring Cannon, “I really don’t mind,” but that she was letting him “know the facts,” Rose put the best face possible on a very bad situation: “we are pulling together nicely to make a go of it,” referring to the three children’s efforts, adding, “Just send what you can and we will do our best here.” In the end Cannon relied on his old Kansas City comrades who, with Shorty Buehler as the financial point man, secured a personal loan that pulled the CLA, and possibly the Cannon-Karsner household, out of their related economic crises. It was only a respite. Two months later Swabeck was writing to Cannon: “We are getting along well so far, paying all the bills, including the rent on 10th Street and a two months gas bill given to us in the form of a black eye: Pay or we shut off! On the other hand Mr Cohen has been in for the rent of the headquarters. He is coming again today and for that we have nothing.”³⁴

Cannon wrote poignantly to Rose, who had obviously taken something of a time-out from New York, Jim, and the problems of their life together, in September 1932, the letter alluding to what he was grappling with politically and personally. He referred to a steadily worsening situation in the League, and an agreement reached in the National Committee that he was to have Rose’s secretarial help. “I wish you would think it over and let me know if you will enlist for this campaign,” Cannon asked. He then moved on to more personal ground, in which the difficult reintegration of Ruth into his and Rose’s life, complicated by extreme want and Rose’s precarious health, was broached in a way that spoke of an intense and loving commitment to renew their own relationship, which had obviously suffered some hard blows. He managed to secure some money owed him and that “was just in time to enable me and Ruth to have sup-

34 Rose to Jim, 29 May 1933, 1 June 1933; Buehler to Cannon, 29 May 1933; Swabeck to Cannon, 7 August 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

per, as we were down to fifteen cents. Ruth paid the gas bill and that ran us short. On top of that they shut off the electricity and we will be in candle light until Thursday when I get paid. I will send you some money.” It hurt Cannon deeply to have to negotiate his life of material insecurity in ways that compromised his relations with both Rose and Ruth, but he was not unmindful of his own contribution to what was obviously a distressingly deteriorating situation:

I have had several talks with Ruth about the arrangements for next winter. She says she is willing to board out for a while until we find a basis of adjustment. We are close together and talk things over more freely than before. I think she understands the difficulty, and your side of it. But the child also has her own side, and I sympathize with her as well as with you. The whole thing is deeply painful to me, as I realize very acutely her love and I have been oppressed with a helpless feeling of frustration and defeat. I want so much to have her and you both with me, to have a home together that is serene and happy, walled off by love and solidarity from the mean and ugly realities of the world. ... I feel a deep regret for the derelictions of my own that have contributed to the difficulty and breakdown, and a strong will to be more considerate and selfless and concerned in the future. I talked with Arne today about Ruth going to board with them for the next period, letting them take the house where we are now if they want it. ... Ruth seems quite willing to try the experiment. I think she understands my difficulty – my desperate need of you, and at the same time my concern and feeling of responsibility to shield you and shelter you, to guard your health and happiness ... You must realize that she is maturing fast and that young womanly wisdom will soon supersede much of the childish willfulness and prejudice that made her such a problem. ... If the thing works out this way, you and I can get a small place downtown near the office, travel light and organize our lives and our work on a firmer basis, Spartan in efficiency and love-bound in unshakeable comradeship for work and play.³⁵

In another late dog days love letter, Cannon confessed that, “I really don’t know what I am going to do about this new yearning for you that is taking possession of me so completely.” He longed for Rose’s presence, and acknowledged that their lives were a “disorganized interlude in which the sense of proportion was lost.” Promising, “I am yours, irrevocably and forever,” Cannon looked back on

35 Cannon to Dearest Rosie, 2 September 1932, Box 3, File 4, JPC Papers.

his eleven years with Rose and saw “its meaning chiefly in the fact that my life touched yours and became, in one degree or another, a matter of importance to you.” Longing to be with Rose, Cannon was “wildly anxious to hear from her,” closing his letter with the plea, “Please think of me. Please write to me.”³⁶ The dog days were taking their toll. They clearly combined much that both pressed on Cannon’s and Karsner’s personal lives and reached well into their political beings.

6 Cannon’s Collapsing World: The Personal Becomes Political

Poverty, children, even Rose’s health – for the first generation of largely male Trotskyists these were *personal* matters for Cannon to attend to as he could. *Politics* demanded that if such *individual concerns* got unduly complicated and became time-consuming they be put aside, and the movement advanced. Cannon was the CLA’s historical center. As the recognized leader, he was expected to take on certain responsibilities, to get things done, and to assume the same role he had played within the factional battles inside the Workers (Communist) Party. It was simply taken as a given, especially by younger childless comrades, but also to a certain extent by the longstanding Cannonists who were his age and older, that they, as members of the CLA, were owed a monopoly of Cannon’s time, resources, and energies. The burdens Cannon shouldered in leading the CLA *and* handling the seemingly overwhelming responsibilities of his personal life, proved, for a brief period, too much.³⁷

Cannon clearly enjoyed bringing capable younger revolutionaries into his political circle, and he extended to them the rights of comradeship. However much he confided in and drew upon the energies, skills, and creativity of such men and women, intimate friendships were reserved for those closer to him in age and experience, men like Bill Dunne, Vincent Ray Dunne, and Arne Swabeck. By the accident of geography and because of Rose’s health problems, Cannon’s first and closest collaborators in the building of the American Left

36 Cannon to Dearest of All, Sunday, no date [1932], Reel 3, JPC Papers.

37 Cannon, too, was at times captive of a certain organizational imperative with respect to the private lives of comrades, although he tended to express it jocularly. He wrote to Swabeck in December 1931, for instance, raising his political eyebrows at what he referred to as “this epidemic of child-births breaking out in Chicago. Have they secured the approval of the organization for such ‘independent activity’?” See Cannon to Swabeck, “The Situation is Becoming Impossible,” 31 December 1931, in Fred Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928–1931 – The Left Opposition in the US, 1928–1931* (New York: Monad, 1981), 405.

Opposition were Spector, Shachtman, and Abern, none of whom had anything approximating Cannon's difficult domestic responsibilities or shared all that much of the proletarian life experiences that their elder comrade valued highly.

With the original Spector-Cannon alliance, there were subtle signs of tensions from almost the very beginning. Spector knew that Cannon's expectations of him were high. It was always understood that Spector, once he established a functioning group in Toronto, would move to the Left Opposition's New York center, where he could play a more decisive role in the group's propaganda, especially in terms of *The Militant*, the Canadian Trotskyist being listed as an Associate Editor since 15 December 1928. But little movement in this direction happened. Cannon and Shachtman traveled to Montreal and Toronto, where they gave talks and, importantly, firmed up Spector in his commitment to relocate to New York. At the beginning of April 1929 Cannon wrote to Spector in an attempt to prod the obviously recalcitrant Canadian to begin putting his Toronto house in order so he could make his move to the United States. It was time that "the close collaboration in literary and other matters" that the two nascent Trotskyists marked out at the time of the Sixth Congress in Moscow come to fruition: "The next period," Cannon concluded, should see "your position as one of the leading forces in the movement on this side of the line ... firmly fixed." Finances, of course, were a predictable problem, but a way would be found around this material barrier, Cannon assured Spector, as long as the Canadian was prepared "for the seven lean years." It was a hard sell, and one not overstated with promises of immediate, sugar-coated remuneration. Spector was not exactly chomping at the bit. When he wired the Provisional Conference Committee handling preparations of the May 1929 National Conference of the Left Opposition that would give birth to the CLA, indicating he would be unable to arrive until well into the first day of the proceedings, Cannon and his comrades were not amused. They passed a unanimous motion instructing the Toronto Trotskyist to telephone Swabeck, who was advised that he was to "demand [Spector's] immediate arrival." One outcome of the conference was undoubtedly the decision that it was time Spector move to New York and begin to take on more of a leadership role, especially pertaining to the group's theoretical and literary work.³⁸

By the time of the CLA's founding convention, Cannon began to withdraw from his Left Opposition responsibilities, but it was only Shachtman and Abern,

38 Spector to Cannon, 7 November 1928, Reel 2D, Russian Center, PRL; "The Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," Oral History Research Office, No. 488, 1963, 198–199, Columbia University, New York, New York; Cannon to Spector, 1 April 1929, Box 3, File 2, JPC Papers; Minutes of the Provisional Conference Committee, 14 May 1929, Box 32, File 1, GP Papers.

in the New York national center, who noticed. Shachtman's complaints about Cannon in the January – May 1929 period, articulated at a later date, seem unduly harsh. They noted that Cannon took far too long to produce the lengthy "Platform of the Communist Opposition" that appeared in two parts in *The Militant* in February and March (given the events of October – January and Cannon's early 1929 speaking tour, when did Shachtman think Cannon *should* have produced the document?). Cannon apparently wavered as to the advisability of even holding the National Conference, his vacillation attributed by Shachtman to "his personal situation." Shachtman was also of the view that Cannon was perhaps coming to believe that the formation of the League might be premature. Finally, Shachtman grouched that Cannon's conference performance was itself sub-par, the report he prepared being done hastily, "at the last moment and lacking in many of the essentials that such an intensely important and historical report should have contained."

When Cannon first suggested, faced with the combined difficulties of Rose's ongoing health problems, Lista Makimson's death, and his children's well-being, that he might have to look for paid employment and turn the Left Opposition administrative tasks over to Shachtman and Abern, the latter were having none of it. Shachtman's blunt words both misunderstood the complications of Cannon's situation and compared his Kansas comrade's sacrifices rather cavalierly to those in the international movement who had borne great privation and loss. His own less challenging, although economically constrained, circumstances were, according to Shachtman, on a par with Cannon's: "His two kids were more or less thrust upon him. Well, I believe of course that this increased his burdens In the present difficult period, tremendous sacrifices have to be made, and I am not saying this with any cheap piousness, either. None of us have made any real sacrifices compared with what some comrades (the Russians, for example) have been making. I know all about Jim's difficulties at home, but I still believe that they have been no better or worse than the average of us." In the midst of these obvious tensions, Shachtman and Abern continued to regard Cannon as "the undeniable leader of the Communist movement in the country," a view reiterated by Glotzer in Chicago: "I do not believe that you and Marty were alone in your faith in Jim. ... the genuine leader of the American communist movement." Glotzer further praised Cannon's role in bringing the American Left Opposition into being, but unlike Shachtman he saw Cannon's performance at the CLA founding convention as the culmination of months of exemplary leadership: "In the early period of the fight it seemed to me that Jim had now 'arrived'. There grew up in the various sections of the groups in the country a real respect for him because he took this line and gave leadership to it during the early struggles. This awakening manifes-

ted itself at the May conference.” After the founding convention of the CLA, however, it was more and more difficult not to recognize how Cannon had retreated under pressures that his young comrades simply did not acknowledge.³⁹

Cannon continued to suggest that he needed to find paid work outside the CLA. More may well have been at stake than steady wages. Jim was succumbing to demoralization. He found it increasingly difficult to make it into the make-shift substitute for an office, which rotated from place to place, or write up yet another article for *The Militant*. Cannon saw little in his circumstances comparable to those of his young kibitzer comrades: Marty, Max, and Maurice. For all that they were drawing on CLA funds in as limited a way as was Cannon, they must have seemed rather footloose and fancy free. With another issue of *The Militant* put to bed, they could trundle off to an Italian Second Avenue restaurant. Cannon, living on Long Island was preoccupied with domestic pressures; his children, his stepdaughter, and Rose were increasingly on his mind. In this unsatisfactory environment, Cannon’s work for the CLA deteriorated. Shachtman, hardly the disinterested observer, offered a description of the worsening situation:

Jim alone was on the payroll after the Chicago conference. But for weeks after our return he did not so much as write a letter to the comrades; the conference minutes and decisions were not sent out: the constitution was not drawn up; stamps and cards were not arranged for. You will never understand or conceive the situation we were in. All that Jim did was to drop in to the office around noon time, read the press, look over the mail, deposit any money that came in (God knows how), then pull out his time table about 4 o’clock and beat it home to Long Island. ... I say flatly, that if it had not been for the spare-time work of the three other comrades, especially Marty and me, there would not have been so much as an issue of *The Militant* appearing since our return from Chicago. Barring a letter now and then to one or two of the groups, Jim completely neglected the work, which was virtually intolerable. Connections began to drop off, a handful of groups were lost entirely to us for a period ..., no money came in for the simple reason that no letters were sent out asking anyone to send in money.

39 The above paragraphs quote from Shachtman to Glotzer, 11 September 1929; Glotzer to Shachtman, 13 September 1929, Reel 20, JPC Papers.

Working at Shachtman's 18th Street apartment because the CLA could not yet afford the costs of renting an office, the air of the domicile must have been thick with tension. Gone was the camaraderie of November 1928, with Cannon dictating letters to supporters as Shachtman typed them at his side, the two expelled Left Oppositionists cracking jokes at each other's expense. Cannon's declining capacity to do the elementary work associated with his leadership roles as editor of *The Militant* and National Secretary of the CLA were attributed by Shachtman to a change of Cannon's political heart. The old factional chief began to articulate his emerging view that the Left Opposition was in a protracted struggle and that "since our victory is such a long way off it is not so desperately necessary to apply every bit of our efforts to the work at hand **now**." In addition, this perspective was exacerbated by Cannon's ostensible laziness. "Jim has never been notorious for excessive energy, as we all know," Shachtman wrote to Glotzer. This seriously misread Cannon's situation. But the outcome was not changing: Cannon was, according to Shachtman, shirking his responsibilities as a leader and as a worker in the cause. The claim was that Cannon was writing not a single line for *The Militant* and that while he attended branch and National Committee meetings he sat silent and brooding. The result was that Shachtman and Abern, carrying the lion's share of the routine labors associated with the CLA, were, by early September 1929, at the break point. "I feel very angry, and very bitter at Jim, and Marty does as well," Shachtman wrote, "and all the more so because one expects better from Jim ... [he] has not conducted himself as a leader of the Opposition, he has not measured up to the demands of the situation, he has neglected his work, he has not collaborated as he should have."⁴⁰

In August/September 1929 things finally came to a head. Discussions among Cannon, Shachtman, Spector, and Abern about the office regime apparently produced a plethora of suggestions as to how things could be altered, with Cannon supposedly oscillating wildly in his moods and inclinations. The only constant was Shachtman's and Abern's refusals to countenance Cannon leaving his position as a paid functionary of the CLA and turning the work over to others, either on a paid or voluntary basis, and their like-minded opposition to Spector's requests that he be allowed to return to Toronto. In the end the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back was Jim acting arbitrarily, walking away from his full-time CLA responsibilities to take up a paying job in the circula-

⁴⁰ Shachtman to Glotzer, 11 September 1929; 30 September 1929, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Drucker *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 54; Sam Gordon in Les Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him: By Thirty-Three Comrades, Friends, and Relatives* (New York: Pathfinder, 1976), 61–62.

tion department of the New York *Herald-Tribune*. David Karsner paved the way for this sinecure, which his daughter Walta remembered suited Jim because it entailed checking on the stock at various Manhattan newsstands. Jim could socialize on the streets and stop in at a cafeteria or tavern for a coffee or a beer. It is unlikely he had his nose to the revolutionary grindstone, and he apparently said little at this time to Shachtman and Abern about the specific family needs he was trying to address. Perhaps he had given up on their capacity to understand much of what he was going through. As a somewhat private individual, Cannon may not have felt it appropriate to broadcast domestic troubles. His “family problems” were his to bear, as he later told Sam Gordon, and he was content to be judged on his public record.⁴¹

When Shachtman, Abern, and Spector finally confronted Cannon, meeting in committee to suggest that he “attend more to administrative work,” a blow-up ensued. Cannon obviously thought that younger comrades had no appreciation of his circumstances, which in his words involved “some terrible complicated personal problems.” Admitting later that he “couldn’t work for a while [and that] I had to find an outside job trying to get by and I had the double problem of the children,” Cannon obviously resented that Shachtman, Abern, and Spector “took that to be a sign that I was quitting the movement.” Unable, perhaps, to address his own retreat, Cannon responded to criticism, according to Shachtman, by lashing out at those who had the temerity to demand more from him than he was able to give. He apparently accused his critics of “factionalism, which he later modified to say unconscious factionalism.” Outraged at the allegation, Spector in particular, struck back, the entire affair descending into escalating recriminations, culminating in Cannon supposedly comparing the Canadian comrade to Weinstone and Pepper, hated adversaries from the old battles against Lovestone. For Spector, whom Shachtman described as having “a sharp way with him at times,” this was too much, and shortly thereafter he made his way back to Toronto. Meanwhile, Shachtman and Abern consolidated their positions and responsibilities for routine CLA administrative work. They barely spoke to Cannon, who was demoted from his position as Editor of *The Militant*. From October 1929 the paper appeared under the name of an editorial collective composed of Abern, Cannon, Shachtman, Spector, and Swabeck. Things did not improve much over the remaining course of 1929 and well

41 Palmer interview with Walta and Marshall Ross, Del Mar, California, 18 April 1996; Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 171; Sam Gordon in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 56, 61–62; Shachtman to Glotzer, 11 September 1929, Reel 20, JPC Papers, refers to Cannon getting “a job on some paper or other.”

into 1930. Cannon found the climate inside the CLA increasingly oppressive. "A bitter anti-Cannon attitude" was stirred up among "the new young people in the League so that every branch meeting was a big hassle and argument about something or other of no great consequence. That's what happens when a movement is in decline and hard pressed. Squabbles develop and people begin to look around for somebody to blame for the troubles of the movement."⁴²

For their part, Abern, Shachtman, Glotzer, and Spector had a different reading of the situation, attributing to Cannon the worst of political motives. Three of these leading figures would later write:

Not for the first time, not for the last, comrade Cannon began to lean back in his chair and leave others to do all the work which had been entrusted to him. We began at the time to hear incessantly about our work being a "protracted uphill struggle," an entirely sound warning for calling off overzealous hotheads ... but behind which we soon detected a *justification for conservatism, inactivity, a tendency to let things drift*, which became worse in the succeeding period.

Shachtman wrote to Glotzer at the end of September 1929 that he knew Cannon could not be very busy, suggesting as well that financial strains on him were not all that great. His paid job let him off in the latter part of the afternoon, and Shachtman heard that Rose was working as well. "So that his economic difficulties can not be very great, certainly not as great as Marty's, for example, or mine for that matter." The charge was then made that Cannon "deserted the League entirely," and that for more than two months at the end of 1929 and the beginning of 1930, Cannon was "not to be seen near the League." Much was made of Cannon's lack of literary contributions to *The Militant*, where editorial work was now done at the CLA's newly-established "ramshackle office on Third Avenue, with the old 'El' roaring in the window." But when Cannon as CLA National Secretary asked Abern if the League could purchase him a typewriter so that he could write articles at home, perhaps with Rose's unpaid, voluntary stenographic and secretarial help, the request was refused. Abern wrote to Glotzer, his understanding of the issue revealing how poisoned the office atmosphere had become:

42 Shachtman to Glotzer, 11 September 1929, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Ring interview, 13 February 1974, also quoted in *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928-31 - The Left Opposition in the US*, 25.

Nowadays Jim, like I often, seems to be on edge and nervous. He says he intends to write more and asks that we furnish him a typewriter for his home, and resents it fiercely that I do not make an immediate purchase. Well, it's a small thing, I suppose, but \$30.00 or \$35 expenditure means a terribly lot of money to us just now; and if one were in earnest about writing, it shouldn't be so hard to buy a machine on the instalment plan for one's self, as others do. At least wages come regularly to him and since not even a used postage stamp is forthcoming from him to the Communist League, I imagine it shouldn't be so difficult to get a machine for his home. Tell him how hard we're pinching to keep things going? It's a waste of breath, even though mixed with carbon dioxide. He would and does reply that we got the money to equip an office properly. To which I can only remark without the slightest sarcasm, that for some months after the conference at Chicago, we got money to get out *The Militant*, but the *Militant* was the rare occurrence, and the wages rather regular.

Abern closed his paragraph of complaint confessing, "I write this ... with the fullest disgust in every way, and chiefly with the thought that such a thing has to serve to illustrate a situation."⁴³

As Cannon later noted and others appreciated, Abern was a hardworking, extremely competent office functionary, whose warm human interest in comrades solidified much. His bravery in the face of anti-communist intimidation during his ILD days or of Stalinist violence in 1928–29 was established unequivocally. Selflessly loyal, Abern was a dedicated, but excessive, factionalist, one always completely committed to a small, consolidated group. As long as the group held, Abern was its advocate, but when cracks appeared and the coherence shattered, his instinct was to attach himself to another group. For the entire course of the 1920s he was a "100 per cent Cannonite" and he stayed that way through the expulsion of October 1928. As his relations with and opinion of Cannon worsened over 1929, however, Abern shifted allegiances: he was now "100 percent anti-Cannonite" and he would harbor resentments for the remainder of the 1930s. His new group identity lacked political moorings, but was tied tightly to animosities to his old faction head. "Abern developed an

43 Martin Abern, Albert Glotzer, and Max Shachtman, "The Situation in the American Opposition: Prospect and Retrospect," 29pp. typescript, 4 June 1932, Roll 10, Reel 3353, Max Shachtman Papers, Tamiment Institute, Bobst Library, New York, New York, [hereafter MS Papers], with a fuller version reprinted in *Dog Days*, 230–281, quote from 238; Abern to Glotzer, 23 November 1929, original in Glotzer Papers, Hoover Institute, Stanford, California, copy in possession of the author.

extremely subjective attitude toward Cannon,” Joe Hansen would later write, “his dislike and even hatred of Cannon” reversing what had once been genuine respect, perhaps even reverence. To “cut down Cannon” now animated Abern to a certain extent. This change manifested itself in all manner of pettiness, of which the typewriter fiasco was merely one incident.

Cannon grew increasingly embittered, and would insist a few years later that the worsening situation “could have been straightened out” if only he had “been dealing with grown-up people – in the personal as well as rev[olutionary] sense.” Beset by “personal difficulties” that “piled upon me and overwhelmed me,” Cannon saw this as “the moment they seized to turn on me like treacherous curs.” For their part, the Shachtman-Abern bloc regarded Cannon as, in the words of Chicago brickmaker and Glotzer collaborator, John Edwards, “revengeful and subjective,” a leader with “right tendencies” who came forward “mainly in factional strife.” Spector, in April 1930, attributed a malaise in the entire New York local to Cannon: “something radically wrong prevails. Not a little of it can be laid to the feet of Jim. I am ready to say that he set a foul precedent before the comrades by his activity – or properly by his lack of activity. If any one thinks that his failures to do anything, his lack of interest, and his absence helped any – that comrade is a bit of a nut. Jim’s role in the last year has been a negligible one. ... [he] failed us during the most trying periods – and that to me is unforgiveable for one who has been the leader of the movement.”⁴⁴ Dog days, indeed.

Cannon understated his demoralization and withdrawal from his CLA responsibilities, accenting instead the personal attacks of these young comrades. His critics, in turn, exaggerated his retreat, refusing to acknowledge either the particularly difficult circumstances Cannon confronted or the extent

44 The above paragraphs draw on Shachtman to Glotzer, 30 September 1929, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 59; Cannon, Miscellaneous Notes, no date, Box 38, File 9, quoted in *Dog Days*, 36–37, where the typewriter request is also noted. See also, Cannon to Vincent R. Dunne, 21 April 1932, reprinted as “The ‘Degeneration of the Old Guard,’” in Fred Stanton and Michael Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–34 – The Communist League of America* (New York: Monad, 1985), 86, referring to this period as one in which Cannon had “a hundred personal provocations under conditions of extraordinary personal troubles and complications.” On Abern see Harry Ring interview with James P. Cannon, in possession of author, 13 February 1974; 23 February 1974 [hereafter Ring interview]; Joseph Hansen, *The Abern Clique* (New York: Socialist Workers Party, September 1972), 5; “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 14, 42–47; Art Sharon in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 85–87. Also John Edwards to Shachtman, 16 April 1932, Roll 10, Reel 3353; and Spector to Swabeck, 8 April 1930, Roll 11, Reel 3354, Max Shachtman Papers, Tamiment Institute, New York University, Bobst Library, New York, New York [hereafter MS Papers].

that the founding figure of America's Left Opposition was, in spite of everything, still contributing to the CLA. Cannon's bouts with the bottle also fueled resentments, if only because they contributed to his abstentionism. In this period, as he told Sam Gordon, Jim drank in order to "get away from some insurmountable problem he didn't want to think about for a while." The dog days provided, as Gordon saw personally, "terribly trying times for Jim," and there were undoubtedly mornings when Cannon, expected to be in the office or preparing for a talk, was sleeping off the hangover of his attempt to escape what was ailing him. There were certainly stretches when Cannon must have appeared, especially to Shachtman and Abern, as absent when his presence was much needed. Some young CLAers, who revered Cannon in 1928, came to dismiss him in later years, the fires of resentment burning factional animosities that fed heated stories of excess, in which Jim's binge drinking took on mythical proportions. Carl Cowl, founding CLA member and mainstay of the League's Minneapolis youth, was adamant in a 1995 interview that in 1929–30 Cannon was drunk for extended periods, months on end, an unlikely feat given the correspondence he conducted and other activities that surface in a scrutiny of the archival record. Less hostile than Cowl, Harry Roskolenko's metaphorical description of Cannon reached into this lore of the drinking man's revolutionary: "He was the Big Bertha ... with more bad whiskey than good blood in him."⁴⁵

Wild stories also circulated that Cannon was quitting "the center" entirely to set up shop in Kansas or Missouri, such rumors having no basis in anything more substantial than a single offhand Cannon comment (clearly made out of the depths of economic desperation) to Shachtman that he might have some economic prospects in the mid-West. When this tale surfaced later, in 1932, Cannon was sufficiently outraged to single out in handwritten notes that Shachtman's recycling of a representation of him as wanting "to retire to M[issouri]" was a "foul result" of premising political criticism on gossip.⁴⁶

Allegations of non-contribution to the CLA press were overstated, as were assertions that Cannon neglected entirely the office correspondence. Signed

45 Sam Gordon in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 57–58; Palmer interview with Carl Cowl, 11 June 1995, Brooklyn, New York; Harry Roskolenko, *When I Was Last On Cherry Street* (New York: Stein and Day, 1965), 178.

46 Shachtman to Glotzer, 11 September 1929, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 171; Abern, Glotzer, Shachtman, "Prospect and Retrospect," quoted in *Dog Days*, 238; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 349–351. For Cannon's response to the Missouri retirement story see the mislabeled, untitled, handwritten document headed "Mass Work," and designated "[1932–1933: re Weisbord?]," Reel 33, JPC Papers. This document is almost certainly an amalgamation of handwritten notes.

articles in *The Militant* were perhaps not the best indication of involvement, but between June – December 1929, Cannon contributed four such major pieces, Spector an equal number, and Shachtman six. Cannon undoubtedly had a hand in some of the extensive and always unsigned writing, cited above, relating to the important events in Gastonia. He alone conducted the sensitive correspondence with Hugo Oehler/John Young that related not only to the Piedmont struggles, but to the Communist Party's Trade Union Educational League conference in Cleveland, which led to a Cannon and Young collaboratively-produced article in an October issue of *The Militant*. Cannon spoke, under the auspices of the CLA, in its Open Forum lecture series on 11 January 1930, addressing the North Carolina labor battles at Gastonia and Marion. Preparing his introduction to Trotsky's pamphlet, *Communism and Syndicalism*, Cannon gave a 29 March 1929 public lecture on the subject at the East 14th Street Labor Temple, and he spoke at a League picnic in Palisades Park, New Jersey, on 18 August 1929. When, in 1932, Abern, Glotzer, and Shachtman insisted that a glance through the CLA newspaper between 30 November 1929 and 25 January 1930 would yield "not a single word contributed by comrade Cannon," their sarcasm was strong, their glance weak, and their debating point somewhat disingenuous. Signed articles by Cannon appeared in the November and January issues bookending these dates, addressing "The New Unions and the Communists" and "The Struggle for the South." Immediately thereafter, *The Militant* featured a lengthy signed Cannon article on "The Socialist Party and Radicalization of the Masses."⁴⁷

Spector's inability to contribute articles, or to take on the editorship of *The Militant* when asked by Shachtman to do so, never produced the kinds of

47 See Abern, Glotzer, and Shachtman, "Prospect and Retrospect," quoted in *Dog Days*, 242; Cannon, "The New Unions and the Communists," 30 November 1929; Cannon, "The Struggle for the South," 25 January 1930; Cannon, "The Socialist Party and Radicalization of the Masses," *The Militant*, 15 February 1930; and the unsigned but Cannon-written "Vincent St. John," *The Militant*, 1 August 1929; "Open Forum of the New York Communist League," *The Militant*, 4 January 1930; "A Lecture on Communism and Syndicalism by James P. Cannon," *The Militant*, 29 March 1930; James P. Cannon, "Introduction," in Leon Trotsky, *Communism and Syndicalism: On the Trade Union Question* (New York: Militant Press, 1931), 3–8; Ticket entitled "Picnic Arranged by the New York Branch of the Communist League of America," 18 August 1929, Box 11, File 39, Martin Abern Papers in John Dwyer Collection, Wayne State University Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit, Michigan [hereafter Abern Papers]. For only a sample of the speech notes from Cannon's public lectures in this period see "Speeches, 1927–1931," Reel 32, JPC Papers: "Lecture to the rww on Revolutionary Perspectives (1930)"; "Crisis in C.I., 1930"; "Revolutionary Perspective in America: New York Labor Forum, 30 December 1930".

animosity that Cannon's like behavior generated. Spector's reasons, stated in a February 1930 "Personal" letter to Max and Marty would no doubt have made Cannon blanch. "The most acute personal difficulties that I have ever experienced, making those of New York look comparatively desirable, have hit me the last few days with the force of a hammer – and have left me temporarily too dazed to think or write." Spector wrote. This private angst was likely related to Spector's decision to pursue a law degree. It also dovetailed with Spector's persistent waffling on coming to New York to join the resident National Committee, a consolidation of leadership that Trotsky endorsed strongly, but to no effect. Spector was not about to be pressured. "To remove abruptly, even for a period of six weeks to New York, at the moment, in the current middle of the academic work I have undertaken with its obligations would be so erratic a decision that it would throw everything into confusion and it would have been far better not to have returned to the course in the first place," Spector explained. He concluded decisively: "having resumed these studies I cannot simply leave everything hanging in the air and take the first train out." Shachtman wrote Spector in April 1930, obviously tiring of the run-arounds he was getting: "As for the center, you have undoubtedly received the letter of the Old Man. What he says there he means seriously. Without any more of this confounded vagueness you simply must make up your mind to come here and shift for yourself, somehow or other."⁴⁸

Two years later, with Spector again called upon to assume his leadership roles and editorial direction of the CLA with respect to *The Militant*, he begged off on the not entirely proletarian grounds that Law School responsibilities weighed him down: "I am working under severe pressure right now. Law finals are not the easiest pastime, particularly when the stuff goes so deeply against the grain that a tremendous effort is required to muster the minimum degree of concentration. I shall breathe once more easily when the unforeseen renewal of *studentenleben* is behind me. The next stage will probably lead to a clash with authorities who will leave me an unfrocked priest." At the same time as Spector was offering these rationalizations of his own political distance from leadership, he nurtured personal grievances against Cannon and his 1929–30 political withdrawal. Spector referred callously to the summer of impoverished isolation Jim and Rose had endured on Long Island, which ended with Cannon's political revival as, "His emergence from 'retirement' in the country life," a resurrection made possible because others had maintained the Left Opposition

48 Spector to Shachtman, 3 February 1930; 13 February 1930; undated [February 1930]; Shachtman to Spector, 26 April 1930, Roll 10/Reel 3353 MS Papers.

“spiritually and organizationally.”⁴⁹ What was sauce for the goose was, most emphatically, not sauce for the gander.

There were, amidst Cannon's collapse into personal crisis, an emerging politics of difference that separated him from Shachtman, Spector, Glotzer, and Abern, but they were not sufficiently serious that they should have driven the nascent Trotskyist movement to the point of rupture. The personal exacerbated the political so that the regime question came, for a brief period in 1929–30, to threaten the Left Opposition's continuity. At issue were different understandings of how the League should function, what it could attempt to do, and how it might undertake its work. Cannon perhaps grasped more intuitively and certainly more quickly than other members of the League, be they young or old, how difficult it would be for the Left Opposition to advance. He appreciated the difficulties of the 1929–30 conjuncture, in which the economy went into its Great Depression freefall, the Lovestone right wing set up its competitive Oppositional shop, and the Comintern and the now consolidated American Communist Party veered seemingly to the left. Yet he retained a balanced perspective. Others with less direct experience in the United States workers movement – Shachtman, Abern, Glotzer and Spector, on the one hand and, even, Trotsky on the other – had more trouble appreciating the new lay of the political land in the United States. In Cannon's view, the immediate realistic course of action remained very much to orient to the Communist Party, to struggle to recruit from its ranks, where small but pivotal clots of disillusionment were

49 Spector to Shachtman, 27 April 1932, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers. Spector apparently graduated from Law School in 1932. He articulated with Meyer Rotstein and was soon in a position to legally act for clients. See Spector to The Honorable W.A. Gordon, Minister of Immigration & Colonization, 15 November 1933, Roll 9, Reel 3352, MS Papers. This correspondence, on the letterhead of Samuel Cohen, Barrister, Solicitor, Notary, Toronto, related to Shachtman being refused entry to Canada. By September 1934 Spector was writing as Barrister-at-Law, with a Toronto office address. See Spector to Shachtman, 4 September 1934, Roll 11, 3354, MS Papers. On the slight particulars of Spector's brief and quite limited career as a lawyer I have benefited from reading Tyler Wentzell's unpublished manuscript, tentatively titled, “Comrades and Scoundrels: William Krehm, the International Anti-Stalinist Left, and the Spanish Revolution.” Note also the fictionalized depiction of Spector as Leo Sather in Earle Birney, *Down the Long Table* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1955), 110–111, where Sather/Spector is identified as “the protean and inimitable leader ... of the whole Trotskyist movement in Canada. ... He was a macaw, a glittering tropical bird; he even had a trick of listening like a bird, ... one eye half-closed and the other cocked across his high keel of a nose. And when whoever had been speaking paused for breath or thought, he could, apparently at will, be silent or ... launch an addendum with such a dry knowing air that the conversation would be willingly surrendered to him like a tray of seeds to peck at.” Sather describes himself in the novel as “a smalltime lawyer who takes on just enough business to keep alive, and saves his energies for politics.”

bound to develop. Such an orientation was preferred to overreaching into new endeavors and optimistic initiatives that would eventually squander the resources of the precarious young movement. This could only breed cynicism and despair within Left Opposition ranks. Better, Cannon insisted, that small but steady gains be registered and caution guide all activity, than that gambles be wagered on illusive and unlikely victories, and funds and personnel lost in precipitous actions. This did not deny the importance of independent activity conducted in ways that aimed to recruit non-Communist Party militants to the Left Opposition, but it did color how the CLA should enter into and regard mass work. In reality, there was not a great deal separating Cannon's approach from those of others in the CLA, but small differences could and did easily become magnified into seemingly larger matters as a revolutionary group turned inward, all decisions were debated hotly, and actions undertaken in ways that demanded close, intimate levels of cooperation. These realities tended to become lost in the fog of Cannon's personal crisis. Opponents claimed wrongly that his orientation was nothing more than conservatism and retreat at the same time that his perspective, even when valid, was prone to be clouded by demoralization and a sense of resignation in the face of so much over which he had little control. When young comrades who looked to him for leadership suddenly began to flex their political muscles, in opposition to Cannon himself, the dog days seemed to be giving Jim Cannon a nasty bite.⁵⁰

Evidence of how bad things had become was the worry that spread through the leading cadre in the September – December 1929 period. Spector wrote to Shachtman upon his return to Toronto in September 1929 that the primary consideration was to “maintain the center, or its nucleus, in these darkest days.” Swabeck, who in the earliest stages of resentment at Cannon's withdrawal regarded the younger comrades as misunderstanding Jim and making more

50 Cannon presents a rather narrowed view of his perspective in *History of American Trotskyism*, 86–87. In hindsight he telescoped the problem into a binary opposition, in which the politics of the Left Opposition was either to orient to the Communist Party or to the mass of workers outside the Party. While this bifurcation was always an issue, hindsight may have allowed Cannon to present it as a more mechanical separation than it was in the 1929–30 period, when it was always the case, for Cannon and for others, that orienting towards the Party and to possibilities outside of it was necessary, just as, within the trade unions, it was the Left Opposition's policy to both promote the possibilities of new unions where they were necessary but not abandon appeals to and work within the established AFL mainstream. A more precise view of Cannon's perspective would suggest that, on the eve of the formation of the CLA Cannon perhaps saw more room for the growth of the Left Opposition in appeals outside the Party, but that with the post-Convention consequences of the Lovestone expulsions and the Third period “left turn” Cannon drew back somewhat.

of his ostensible absences from work than was warranted, grew more critical by December 1929. He implored Cannon to return to an active leadership role. Appreciative of the personal complications that necessitated a *temporary* stepping back on Cannon's part, Swabeck was nonetheless troubled that since the October 1929 rearrangements of responsibilities at the CLA's New York center, Cannon's "retirement or absence ... has become so complete and of such permanent character." In Minneapolis Vincent R. Dunne expressed similar concerns and regrets. Swabeck now stepped into Cannon's traditional role as caretaker, impressing on his old friend that "history has already placed the greatest amount of responsibility for the movement on your shoulders." He wondered what might help remove the obstacles that hindered Cannon's return to the collective leadership of the Communist League of America. Fed up with what he no doubt regarded as the pettiness of his comrades, Cannon offered little in the way of suggestion. Swabeck also addressed the politics of Cannon's position. He argued that while it was indeed necessary to guard against "the danger of a false front which can lead only to illusions," it was also essential that the Left Opposition not err "in the opposite extreme which becomes expressed in letting matters drift and letting the movement depend purely on stimulus from its natural impulses." Swabeck's worries would carry into the late dog days. He rebuked Cannon in 1933 for his failure to follow through on routine administrative matters and deliver on various commitments. "[Y]ou have a very bad habit in certain instances of stalling and delaying, which some day will be your undoing," Swabeck chided Cannon. A future ally, at this point in time connected to the Shachtman faction, Morris Lewit, thought Cannon a political leader who could rise to the occasion and shine in the pedagogical project of clarifying programmatic differences. But he recognized that Cannon had little "patience for routine," and was handicapped by what Lewit described as a disposition to laziness, a trait that only worsened under the depressing conditions of the dog days, with Cannon inclined to turn to drink in the face of what he considered unfair and irresolvable differences with his comrades. Lewit expressed frustration with Cannon's lackadaisical approach to office work: "He would come in late to the office. I would have the mail prepared for him to look at, and we would talk about what needed to be done. But he wasn't very good for detail." Rose Karsner, hounding Jim for articles he was late on delivering, concurred.⁵¹

51 Spector to Shachtman, 19 September 1929, Roll 10/Reel 3353, MS Papers; Swabeck to Cannon, 5 December 1929, Box 3, File 2, JPC Papers; Swabeck to Cannon, 8 April 1930, Box 3, File 3, JPC Papers; Paul Le Blanc and Michael Steven Smith, "Morris Lewit: Pioneer Leader of American Trotskyism (1903–1998)," in Paul Le Blanc and Thomas Barrett, eds., *Revolutionary Labor Socialist: The Life, Ideas, and Comrades of Frank Lovell* (Union City, NJ: Smyrna

Central to Swabeck's and others' concerns was *The Militant*. Shachtman and Abern turned the paper into a weekly rather than a semi-monthly, with Cannon in opposition. Cannon's qualms were always that such an accelerated move into a more regular publication schedule would tax the CLA staff and resources to the point of rupture. So acute was the financial crisis within the League that, in October 1929, it could not absorb the costs of producing a special stamp for those contributing to the Weekly Militant Fund. And yet the push to put *The Militant* on a weekly publication schedule, with the added burden of establishing a print shop, forged ahead. Once Shachtman, Abern, Spector, and Glotzer managed to get *The Militant* on track as a weekly in November 1929, they won over skeptics such as Swabeck and impressed their European comrades, including Trotsky, as well as potential recruits in the United States. It was difficult to dismiss the Left Opposition as a fly-by-night operation when it was making such great strides in consolidating its press.

The ongoing debate over the frequency with which *The Militant* would appear pitted Cannon constantly against his younger and seemingly more energetic opponents. Over the course of 1929–30 this issue kept the CLA national center's pot boiling, with Cannon arguing for *The Militant* to appear monthly in the summer of 1929, and opposing a trip by Shachtman to see Trotsky in furtherance of funding the weekly paper. Shachtman wrote to Spector in February 1930, complaining that almost everyone was willing to do their utmost to sustain the weekly publication of *The Militant*, with Swabeck on side and Glotzer ready to make a move from Chicago to New York to pitch in. "As usual," Shachtman complained, "there is the hitch in the form of Jim's objections. He has declared his opposition ... Il Maestro still fingers the same lute. Pardon me if I sound bitter, but when he proposes at this date that we return *to a semi-monthly* ... I cannot but entertain a harsh resentment." Abern posed the issue in terms that perhaps articulated the differences now separating himself and Cannon. Money and expanding the CLA's reach beyond the Party orientation that Cannon was pushing were central to the discontents the weekly *Militant* stirred: "What was a danger I saw coming some time ago, is reality now, but despite that our ideas stand and the possibilities we have still remain. We have never had a chance to get a breathing space – to go out and exploit new fields. Now as things stand there will be no issue of the weekly unless we get immediately \$100.00."

Press, 2000), 282; Rose to Jim, 3 May 1933, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Swabeck to Cannon, 17 April 1933, *Dog Days*, 509. See, as well, Sam Gordon in Les Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him: By Thirty-Three Comrades, Friends, and Relatives* (New York: Pathfinder, 1976),

In April 1930 Shachtman conducted an extensive correspondence trying desperately to raise needed funds to sustain *The Militant* in its weekly format. "If only we could rob, borrow, or beg \$1000," he wrote in frustration, "There are literally a number of miracles we could perform right away, and take the breath away from the fakirs. It is so confoundingly humiliating to think that we are held up for lack of a lousy few hundred." Cannon publicly championed the weekly *Militant* in his account of the CLA's first full National Committee meeting since the organization's founding, held in New York City, 24–27 May 1930. He highlighted Trotsky's injunction that the United States Left Opposition should make "heroic efforts" to preserve *The Militant* as a weekly, even as he privately no doubt considered it wrong-headed given the material (administrative and financial) circumstances. The May 1930 CLA National Committee Plenum confirmed that Shachtman and Abern had, in effect, displaced Cannon for the moment. Shachtman was appointed Managing Editor of *The Militant*, and Abern took over the position of National Secretary. Spector was recalled to New York, and Swabeck was to move there as well.

Cannon's collapse, seemingly originating in the personal, had now become obviously political. Yet Cannon was not quite wrong, and the history of the next months would, in some ways, vindicate him. Trotsky's call for heroics, and his promises to help his American comrades financially at some point in the future as he begged off immediate support, which will be addressed in more detail later in this chapter, were not enough to save *The Militant* as a weekly. Cannon's sober judgment proved to be right. In July 1930 the paper reverted to a semi-monthly.⁵²

52 The above paragraphs draw on Glotzer to Shachtman, 3 October 1929; Shachtman to Spector, 8 February 1930; Shachtman to Swabeck, 26 April 1930; Shachtman to Spector, 26 April 1930; Shachtman to Vincent Dunne, 26 April 1930, Roll 10/Reel 3353, MS Papers; and Dunne to Shachtman/Abern, 4 January 1930, quoted in Abern, Glotzer, Shachtman, "Prospect and Retrospect," in *Dog Days*, 249, and June Minutes of the CLA, also quoted in *Dog Days*, 241; Abern to Spector, 5 March 1930, Box 11, File 44, Abern Papers; Minutes of Meeting of the National Committee of the Communist League of America (Opposition), 14 October 1929; 21 October 1929; 28 October 1929; 4 November 1929; 11 November 1929; 18 November 1929, Box 35, Folder 3, GB Papers. On the inability of Shachtman to secure immediate funds from Trotsky see Shachtman to Abern, 22 March 1930 [Prinkipo], Reel 20, JPC Papers. See, as well, Leon Trotsky, "Greetings to the Weekly Militant," in *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1929* (New York: Pathfinder, 1975), 370; "The 'Impossible' Weekly," *The Militant*, 15 October 1929; "Greetings Sent to the Weekly," *The Militant*, 14 December 1929; "Hail the Weekly Militant," *The Militant*, 21 December 1929; James P. Cannon, "The Plenum of the American Communist Opposition," *The Militant*, 7 June 1930, reprinted in Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928–31*, 256–261; "Rally to Weekly," *The Militant*, 14 June 1930; "A Forced Retreat," *The Militant*, 26 July 1930. On the centrality of the weekly

The tensions, approaches to work, and challenges raised as the CLA struggled to launch and then sustain its newspaper as a weekly exposed differences separating Cannon from almost the entirety of the League's leadership, with the possible exception of Swabeck. The latter occupied a middle ground between Cannon's reserve and the prevailing optimism of the Minneapolis branch, Glotzer in Chicago, and the consolidating Shachtman-led forces in New York/Toronto. Cannon's cautions were overridden by the hopes of the vast majority of his comrades, however starry-eyed was their collective prognosis for the future. When Cannon balked at Shachtman traveling to Prinkipo to secure funds from Trotsky for the weekly *Militant*, he stood alone. It is possible that in staking out this solitary ground Cannon was both right and wrong. His assessment of the actualities of what it was possible for the CLA to do proved prescient. But in questioning a potential international subsidy to the American movement, which he may well have likened to the material control Stalinism exercised over communism in its United States variant, Cannon undoubtedly erred. There is suggestive but inconclusive evidence that Cannon was wary of reproducing the kind of "master-servant" relation that had characterized Comintern/Workers (Communist) Party relations in the era of the notorious "cables" of the mid-to-late 1920s. Cannon certainly wanted none of that, as he spelled out in a summer 1929 Report to the New York Branch about the Communist League of America's founding conference. His judgment on this front was nevertheless undoubtedly clouded by the personalized acrimony that had emerged in the CLA and that left Cannon more isolated than he had ever been in his years on the revolutionary left. The turmoil in the New York office, where Cannon came to have little faith in the capacity of Shachtman and Abern to keep things on the rails, no doubt also influenced his assessment about what the prospects were for a weekly *Militant*. Still, Cannon never withdrew to the extent his critics charged. He was involved in all discussions that grew out of the May 1930 CLA Plenum, but managed to largely avoid falling into the pit of *personalized* attack that was coming to characterize the Shachtman, Abern, Glotzer, and Spector alliance. Cannon held together those aligned

Militant in this period see the detailed report in Martin Abern to Arne Swabeck et al., 30 December 1929, Reel 20, JPC Papers. Glotzer claimed he moved to New York in November 1929, but correspondence cited above suggests that this move did not take place until February 1930 or later. See Glotzer, *Trotsky: Memoir & Critique*, 28. For the motions reconfiguring responsibilities in the National Committee and with respect to the editorship of *The Militant*, see CLA, Minutes of Plenum of National Committee, 24–27 May 1930, Box 32, File 3, GB Papers. When, in 1931, the revival of a weekly *Militant* was broached, Swabeck would be more cautious than Cannon. See Communist League of America, National Executive Committee, Minutes, 4 May 1931, Box 32, File 3, GB Papers.

with him instinctually, even in the face of evidence (and concern) that he had not, indeed, been carrying his full leadership weight in New York. In this context, his young opponents were forced somewhat on the defensive, had to curb their appetite for condemnation, and move forward in the actual work of the League. While they won Cannon's immediate displacement from authoritative offices, Shachtman, Abern, and others backed away from what Cannon would later describe as their plan to "supplant the outlived leadership."

This "hidden platform," undoubtedly shored up with the genuine belief that Cannon's retirement from political leadership was irreversible, relied on waiting for more evidence of "the old guard's" degeneration, so that the League as a whole could be convinced that it was time for a new regime. But things did not quite work out this way. The bulk of the Minneapolis branch, reluctantly prepared to weigh evidence of Cannon's shirking of his responsibilities, was not convinced by Shachtman and Company's performance at the May 1930 NC Plenum. Vincent R. Dunne, who expressed his confidence in Abern and Shachtman and his disappointment in Cannon before the May meeting of the National Committee came away shaking his head at the "poverty of argument and discussion, the total lack of political groundwork for the assault" waged against his old Wobbly co-worker. In the period following the New York National Committee meeting, according to Cannon, three out of four of the Shachtman, Abern, Spector, Glotzer aspirants to League leadership "went to sleep, and not like the bear, for the winter months only, but for the whole year round." Within a matter of months Swabeck had taken over the position of National Secretary from Abern, sacrificing a well-paid job in Chicago for the insecure remuneration of a CLA functionary. Spector, barely touching down in New York, beat another hasty retreat to Toronto. Glotzer, working nine hours a day, seven days a week, in the New York subway system, and consolidating his long-sought after relationship with Edith Harvey, helped out in the CLA office during his "free time." He longed to follow in Max's footsteps in meeting "the Old Man," having an eye out for a chance to travel to Europe and see Trotsky.⁵³

Cannon began, in this context of a reconfiguration of the New York center, to revive. If Shachtman's European pilgrimage to secure funds from Trotsky for the weekly *Militant* proved a bust, as we shall see below, there was an ironic and

53 The above paragraphs draw on *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932-34: The Communist League of America*, esp. 86, 88, 411. See also Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 54-55; Glotzer, *Trotsky: Memoir & Critique*, 28; and the excellent brief summary of this period in *Dog Days*, 44-47. For Cannon on "master-servant" relations and the Comintern see Cannon, Notes for a "Summer '29 Report to the NY Branch about Communist League of America Founding Conference," Reel 32 JPC Papers.

highly positive twist to this travel. It revealed that there remained a political basis of unity within the original group that consolidated the Left Opposition and founded the CLA. Trotsky's initial paean to the weekly *Militant*, which it would have been surprising if Cannon had not taken as an inappropriate intervention siding against him in an internal League matter, contained a series of utopian, even other-worldly suggestions. They flew directly in the face of Cannon's more sober predilections, and they were too much for even Shachtman to accept. Trotsky claimed that a weekly in the United States was merely the stepping stone to a daily, and that preparations should commence to put *The Militant* on this footing. He further suggested that the Communist League of America need not orient itself to either the "official party" or the "right wing." Rather, the CLA should immediately struggle to win over the "revolutionary ranks" of the mass of American workers and, in the process, develop itself into an independent party. Cannon knew full well the folly of such overblown and rhetorical claims, having lived through similar directives in his days as a leading figure of the Workers (Communist) Party. When Shachtman showed the good sense and capacity of conviction to change Trotsky's mind, eliciting a retraction of sorts from "the Old Man," Cannon was pleased. He wrote a *Militant* article championing his perspective that the League's work must concentrate on winning what could be secured from the "official Party." It appeared, in July–August 1930, to be a strategy bearing fruit. This showed Cannon two important things: that Trotsky was, unlike Stalin, capable of revising his views when presented with evidence that they were out of touch with particular conditions; and that an important plank in the bridge back to his working closely with Shachtman had indeed been laid.⁵⁴

It would take much more before Cannon fully resurrected himself, but the signs of his reemergence as a forceful and effective leader of the CLA were now appearing. By mid-February 1931 the former Wobbly was back on the debating circuit, crossing swords on the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat with the anarchist editor of *Road to Freedom*, Walter Starrett. The New York Labor Temple event drew a crowd of 500. It was followed by two Cannon lectures in Boston and New York on the new unionism and the "progressives."⁵⁵

54 Trotsky, "Greetings to the Weekly Militant," in *Writings*, 1929, 370; Trotsky, "Discussions with Max Shachtman," and "Prospects of the Communist League of America," in Trotsky, *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement 1, 1929–1933* (New York: Pathfinder, 1979), 24–29, 31–32; Cannon, "Deeper into the Party," in Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928–37*, 284–288; "Hugo Oehler Joins Opposition," *The Militant*, 21 June 1930; "NY Party-YCL Group for Opposition," *The Militant*, 28 June 1930; "The Mass Workers Join the Opposition," *The Militant*, 26 July 1930.

55 "Debate: 'Is the Proletarian Dictatorship Necessary?'" *The Militant*, 15 January 1931; "The

Facilitating this return to active duty were indications that his personal life was taking a turn for the better, not the least of which was Rose Karsner's reintegration into the revolutionary movement. Karsner, who was developing a relationship with Left-wing needle trades activist, CLA recruit, and wife of Morris Lewit (Stein), Sylvia Bleeker, and thus possibly breaking out of her depression, was part of a group of Oppositionists who traveled to Comstock prison in September 1930 to see imprisoned furrier Maurice Malkin. Karsner, Bleeker, and Shachtman made the trip, along with others. In November 1930 it was announced that Karsner was to take over the business and financial management of *The Militant*, her first sustained, professional involvement in the Left Opposition/CLA. The year ended with Cannon offering an October study class on "The History of the American Labor Movement" and a November Open Forum on "Thirteen Years of the Russian Revolution," both the teaching sessions and the talk taking place in New York. Cannon was clearly back, although the dog days had far from run their course.

Also presenting a class with him at the CLA-sponsored Lower East Side Stuyvesant Casino was Albert Weisbord, a willful, bespectacled thirty-year old veteran of mill struggles from Passaic to New Bedford to Gastonia. Weisbord, who attended Harvard Law School before dropping out to join the revolutionary movement, was also giving a study class on "Marxian Economics." The surplus value he would bring to the Communist League of America would extract a significant organizational cost, but it would definitely catapult Cannon back into the active leadership of the Left Opposition.⁵⁶

'Dictatorship' Debate," and "Cannon Lecture in Boston," *The Militant*, 15 February 1931; "Communists and Progressives," *The Militant*, 1 March 1931.

56 The above paragraphs draw on "Is Sylvia Bleeker to be Expelled?" *The Militant*, 15 August 1930; "Rose Karsner Bus. Manager," *The Militant*, 15 November 1930; "All Invited to the Formal Opening of Two Study Classes," *The Militant*, 1 October 1930; "NY Open Forum," *The Militant*, 15 November 1930. For a brief introduction to Weisbord and Passaic, citing further sources, see Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928*, 256-260. On Cannon's pedagogical and lecturing work for the League at this time see Cannon's notes for "Revolutionary Perspective in America: New York Forum Lecture, 20 December 1930," and "Lesson/Lecture I, II, III, VI: Labor History, 1930-1931," Reel 32, JPC Papers.

7 The Weisbord Whirlwind

Cannon closed 1930 with a letter to Minneapolis's Vincent Ray Dunne. Written over two different days because of a busy schedule of meetings and the distractions of the holiday season, the correspondence was evidence of Cannon's revived interest in and heightened optimism about the Communist League of America. A chasm was bridged with the reorganization of the national office. Prospects in New York were looking increasingly bright, with the Weekly Forums drawing upwards of 100, finances flowing into the branch at a rate unanticipated, and new developments with a needle trades fraction. Acknowledging that there had been "practically no administration for months," and that affairs were slipping across the country, Cannon was now convinced that with Swabeck taking over the position of National Secretary and Rose handling the business management end of things, better days were in sight. Keen on the publication program, which now included plans for a theoretical magazine, and with a new-found enthusiasm for an accelerated schedule for *The Militant*, Cannon seemed transformed. His energies revived, and his views altered. "I consider the issuance of a monthly magazine and the transfer to a weekly *Militant* very near – and this time it will be on a firm foundation," he wrote.

If this letter signaled the end of Cannon's retreat, he would continue to deal with personal crises, especially in terms of his precarious financial condition. The Dunne letter thus marked an upturn in Cannon's political spirit, but it was not given to complacency. It warned of dangers in the offing: "There are some signs of the approach of an ideological crisis in our ranks." Worried by the pattern of splits that had plagued the European sections of the Left Opposition, Cannon wanted to preserve gains made in the last half of 1930: "We alone succeeded in maintaining a formal unity and a considerable degree of ideological cohesion." Mindful of the serious disagreements that had arisen within the CLA's National Committee in 1929, Cannon paused to note that they should not be forgotten, but then moved on to stress that for all the acrimony, the result had not been a factional and irrevocable parting. Rather, the existence of a unified CLA supporting a commonly-agreed on platform was "proof of a fundamental unity on the most decisive questions. The things that bound us together were stronger than those which pulled us apart." That said, Cannon feared that there were new dangers emanating from "tendencies, some conscious and some unconscious, to revise the platform." Altering somewhat his pre-1929 Convention thoughts on "organizing the revolutionary workers outside the party," Cannon now put the accent on narrowing the tasks of the Opposition:

Our fight is an intransigent fight for principle as a faction of the party. ... Under the given conditions this view condemns us for the moment to the position of a comparatively small group and decrees our activity to be mainly propagandistic and critical. Along this line we must have the perspective of a long and stubborn struggle. During the early part of this struggle – perhaps for a long time, perhaps for years yet – we will occupy the position of a minority.

Against this focused understanding of what the CLA should be doing, Cannon counter-posed the mistaken perspective of those who “seek a way out of the situation by a shortcut under the enticing but thoroughly false slogan of ‘mass work.’” Already, Cannon pointed out, the CLA witnessed the capitulations, backslidings, and resignations of erstwhile Left Oppositionists who clutched at the straw of “mass work.”

In Toronto, an early defender of Spector, James Blugerman, broke down “under the severity of the struggle as a member of the small Marxist minority” giving up the battle “for principle and betrayed his own convictions.” His prescription for “mass work,” what Cannon castigated as nothing more than the need for a “little social ‘company,’” was to fall back in line with the Stalinist Third Period policies in the needle trades unions, working within the Communist Party to split the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. Cannon’s old friend, Tom O’Flaherty, had also succumbed to the attraction of “mass work,” sponsoring a Farmer-Labor Party newspaper “monstrosity” in Plentywood, Montana that comrades in Minneapolis were taken in by for a time. O’Flaherty, who kept up a chummy, apolitical correspondence with Abern, also championed perhaps the most ardent dissident communist advocate of “mass work” who, by the end of 1930, was factoring into the Communist League of America’s affairs, Albert Weisbord.⁵⁷

57 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon to Vincent R. Dunne, 16 December 1930 & 5 January 1931, reprinted as “Signs of a Crisis,” in Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928–31*, 289–295. This collection of Cannon’s writings/speeches also contains the important 23 December 1930 statement, “The Policy of the Opposition and Our Present Tasks,” published as “Our Policy and Present Tasks,” 296–312, in which Cannon presents the position of the CLA’s National Committee against Weisbord’s orientation. On O’Flaherty’s Farmer-Labor Party maneuvers see *Dog Days*, 53; “On the Proposal for a New Farmer-Labor Party Fraud: Against Opportunism and Adventurism of the Right Wing,” *The Militant*, 1 November 1930; Communist League of America, National Executive Committee, Minutes, 3 July 1931, Box 35, Folder 5, GB Papers. For more on O’Flaherty’s views on Weisbord, Farmer-Laborism, and Cannon see O’Flaherty to Abern, 14 July 1933; 26 July 1933; Abern to O’Flaherty, 15 August 1933, Box 12, File 14, Martin Abern Papers in John Dwyer Collection, Wayne State University Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit, Michigan. As

Cannon knew well Weisbord's "cyclonic" capacities, and his potential as a mass workers' leader. He saw, albeit from something of a distance, what the individualistic Weisbord accomplished in the New Jersey mill town, Passaic, in 1926. A strike of 16,000 textile operatives erupted under Weisbord's leadership, displacing the quiescent American Federation of Labor-affiliated United Textile Workers and threatening to sustain a militant industrial unionism that challenged directly the prevailing Workers (Communist) Party's fearful backing away from dual unionism. While it ended in defeat, the Passaic struggle was often seen as "the outstanding conflict of the Coolidge era," and Weisbord was its unmistakable architect, albeit one who, in the end, was sacrificed on a number of altars. The battle eventually succumbed to employer intransigence, municipal and police repression, the obsessive antagonism of the established trade union bureaucracy to militant industrial unionism, and a decided failure on the part of Communists, Cannon among them, to follow a resolute path of endorsement and defense of Weisbord's energetic course.⁵⁸

Aware of Weisbord's dissatisfactions with the direction taken by the CPUSA in the Gastonia strikes and their legal defense campaigns through his summer 1929 correspondence with Oehler/Young, Cannon was also appreciative that, as of later in the year, Weisbord had been cut loose from the Party. He was either expelled with his wife Vera as Lovestoneites (which they were not), or turfed because of a letter of resignation that miffed the CP leadership, "it was never quite clear." In this context, Cannon considered that Weisbord might be a potential recruit to the CLA.

In January 1930, Cannon publicly chastised the Communist Party for "throwing Weisbord aside without any serious or valid reason." He noted that "the party manipulators [were] discarding a valuable and necessary force in the struggle to organize the textile workers against the mill owners and the AFL reactionaries." Cannon speculated that, "The masses of the textile workers who saw in Weisbord, the organizer of the great Passaic strike, the symbol of their aspiration for militant organization, will not be enthused by his removal for purely party reasons." In addition, communist workers were advised that in dumping Weisbord the Party was simply providing further proof that its bur-

an indication of the common platform Cannon referred to see [Cannon], "Organization of the Communist Opposition," Box 11, File 43, Abern Papers. On the Plentywood radical milieu see Verlaine Stoner McDonald, *The Red Corner: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Northeastern Montana* (Helena: Montana Historical Society, 2010).

58 See Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, esp. 256–260; Weisbord, *A Radical Life*, 100–136; Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 224–232; Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism*, 140–144.

eaucrats demanded “a hand-picked administration of yes-men in the unions under their control, and that no dissenting opinions will be tolerated.” Another Cannon article in *The Militant* commemorated the Passaic struggle and ran with the subtitle, “Some Lessons in Militant Labor Leadership for the Future.”⁵⁹

At this time the Weisbords, fresh from the Piedmont struggles of 1929, relocated to the northeast. The lessons of defeat in the South now further extended Weisbord's critique of the American Communist Party's leadership, just as his appreciation of the crisis of the Comintern grew as he and Vera were given their exit papers from the now thoroughly Stalinized CPUSA. The young but eminently experienced Weisbord couple settled into New Jersey industrial jobs, intending on developing ties in the African American quarter of Newark. They were also furthering their understanding of Marxist economic theory, Vera taking a month off waged work to study the three volumes of Marx's *Capital*. Soon Weisbord, almost totally isolated from contacts with Party members, was reading *The Militant*, a shocking development according to his wife. There was little in the way of Left Opposition activity in New Jersey at this point, although some evidence of Young Workers League sympathies for the CLA surfaced in the summer of 1930. Cannon met with the Weisbords in Newark, discussing Trotsky's victimization at the hands of Stalin as well as the critique of the Communist International put forward by the Russian Opposition. Cool to Cannon personally, Albert and Vera Weisbord nonetheless learned much from him, gaining an invaluable introduction to basic Trotskyist perspectives on the nature of the struggle for a revived Leninism, both internationally and nationally. But the couple, straddling ultra-leftism and an opportunistic fetishization of “mass work,” would never be assimilated to the program of the Communist League of America. Cannon later claimed to have been dumbfounded by Weisbord's brash assumptions that he could simply talk his way into anything.⁶⁰

59 Cannon to Young, 19 August 1929, published as “Defense Policy in Gastonia,” and “The Struggle for the South,” in Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928–31*, 214, 229–230; Cannon, “Passaic Strike Anniversary,” *The Militant*, 22 February 1930; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 87. For Weisbord's convoluted explanation of his expulsion from the Communist Party see “My Expulsion from the Communist Party,” *Class Struggle*, 1 (August – September 1931); 1 (December 1931).

60 Weisbord, *A Radical Life*, 293–298; “The Rank and File of Newark Speaks Out,” *The Militant*, 12 July 1930; Ring interview, 17 October 1973. It is perhaps an understatement to note a coolness to Cannon on the part of Vera Buch and Albert Weisbord. Note Weisbord's correspondence with Theodore Draper, revealingly insulting and fixated on attacking Cannon, including questioning Cannon's history in the IWW. “What job did he hold? Whom did he ‘organize’?” See “Correspondence with Theodore Draper,” <http://www.weisbord.org/>

Weisbord did indeed manage to talk his way into the CLA, at least in limited ways, in the New York City local. The resident National Committee of the League, for instance, decided to open the pages of *The Militant* to Weisbord, publishing a two-part article that constituted the main components of a speech delivered to the rival rightist Communist Party Opposition at a Plenum of the Lovestone group. Weisbord's purpose seemed to be to encourage united front "mass work" on the part of both Right and Left Oppositions. This was advocated at precisely the same point that the Lovestone press, *Revolutionary Age*, proposed a united front of the CPUSA and its two expelled Oppositions, the better to challenge capitalism and its agents. The CLA understandably rejected the Lovestone maneuver, at the same time that it found little to its liking in Weisbord's suggested bridges to mass work. From Weisbord, the CLA demanded more clarity on international questions. He was, for instance, vague on the importance of explaining how Comintern policies in China insured the defeat of revolutionary initiatives, just as he often appeared inadequately cognizant of the ways ostensible Left Oppositionist groups in Europe faltered in their appreciation of fundamental principles. The CLA also stood firm in its refusals of Weisbord's assumptions that mass work, in and of itself, would fuse the fractured communist oppositions in the United States. It noted as well that Weisbord's accommodation to the ultra-leftism of the Third Period compromised his perspective in adventurist calls for the unemployed to engage in more battles with the police and in suggestions that, "Through the fighting squads organized by ... block groups, a whole section of the city could be held." Against this failure to criticize the Party's Third Period "absurdities and monstrous exaggerations ... of an impending revolutionary situation in the country," the CLA stressed that it was necessary to appreciate that, "The class conscious vanguard is exceedingly small today. It is confronted by a working class virtually everywhere on the defensive, and its main problem is the organization of a defensive resistance to the onslaught of the bourgeoisie. ... Weisbord's views are not only harshly out of harmony with the views of the Opposition, but also with the elementary realities of the situation." On the basis of these and other differences of principle the National Committee could not accept Weisbord as a

Draper.htm, accessed 2 April 2010. Note as well, Albert Weisbord, "The Party Record of James P. Cannon," <http://www.weisbord.org/Record.htm>, accessed 2 April 2010, a document that claims that when Cannon visited the Weisbords in New Jersey he said "nothing to us about the revelation he had received. A little later when we read Trotsky's program in the Militant we decided our place was with the International Left Opposition. WHY DID CANNON NOT TRY TO CONVINCE US?" This account is obviously a misrepresentation, and is directly contradicted by the recollections of Vera Buch Weisbord, cited above.

member of the CLA, but it held the door open to future collaboration “in fields of work conforming to his position.”⁶¹

As O’Flaherty wrote to Abern, Weisbord was an extreme “individualist,” for whom “every knock is a boost.” Cannon thought he simply “made an awful lot of noise.” The hubbub peaked first in December 1930, before receding and reappearing in 1932–33. Weisbord used the regular study class on Marxist economics that he was teaching for the CLA in October 1930 to wage a war of position against the League’s leadership. He was especially critical of Cannon, who was represented as sectarian and conservatively opposed to the kind of mass work in the unions and blocs with the Lovestoneites and others that would precipitate a new proletarian upheaval. “Like a true graduate of the Pepper school,” Cannon wrote to Vincent Ray Dunne, Weisbord utilized “the contacts thus given him to organize a faction against us. He had eight or ten comrades – mostly young ones who came to us last spring from the Lovestone party faction – lined up to fight for his admission to the league and the overthrow of the present leadership.” Weisbord convinced some in the New York CLA that he could “save the communist movement” by pulling “mass movements out of his sleeve.” Cannon saw through “the little flurry,” understanding that Weisbord failed to appreciate what the Lovestone group actually stood for, just as he had a weak grasp of the actual class relations of the period, either in terms of the balance of forces between “official communism” and the Left Opposition, or between revolutionaries and their capitalist enemies. As early as January 1931, the National Executive Committee of the Communist League of America (Opposition) ascertained that Weisbord was prone to shoot from the programmatic hip. He made declarations in public meetings that contradicted the established positions of Trotsky and the International Left Opposition. For his part, Weisbord placed the accent on the fear of the established CLA figureheads, whom he claimed stood opposed to his admission to the League on the grounds of jealousy and recognition that admitting the former textile worker organizer would present the threat of a rival leader able to intersect with the working masses.⁶²

61 See Albert Weisbord, “A Statement of Views on Some Disputed Questions,” *The Militant*, 1 September 1930; “A Statement of Views on Some Disputed Questions,” *The Militant*, 15 September 1930; and “A Concrete Program on the Unemployed,” *The Militant*, 1 November 1930. For CLA National Committee responses see “A Reply to Comrade Weisbord,” *The Militant*, 15 September 1930; “Weisbord’s Proposals on Unemployment,” *The Militant*, 1 December 1930; and also Benjamin Gitlow [Workers Communist League] to Comrades, no date, Roll 9, Reel 3352, MS Papers; “Lovestone’s ‘United Front’ Maneuver,” *The Militant*, 15 September 1930.

62 O’Flaherty to Abern, 14 July 1933; 26 July 1933, Abern Papers; Cannon, *History of Amer-*

To clear the air, Cannon and Shachtman, united in their insistence that Weisbord could not be assimilated to the politics of the Communist League of America, called a New York branch meeting to discuss the issues. They took the unprecedented step of inviting their “mass work”/“united front” critic to debate differences face-to-face. Weisbord’s challenge brought Cannon decisively out of his political somnolence, and Jim’s speech before the New York branch was a carefully constructed, thorough, and hard-hitting defense of Left Oppositional principles. It left no doubt that a vast programmatic gulf separated Weisbord’s orientation from that of the CLA. Weisbord’s call to join hands with the Lovestone group to “begin the work the Party criminals can not do” and “to resist the violent tactics of the party officialdom,” was rejected for a variety of reasons. It wrote off the militant base of the Communist Party, to whom the Left Opposition still insisted it must address its propaganda and from whom recruits to Leninism could still be won. Equally critically, Weisbord’s attempt to bring together the Right and Left Oppositions on an equal footing swept principled programmatic issues under the carpet of an opportunistic bloc that would necessarily discredit the Left in the eyes of Communist and unaligned militant workers alike. As Cannon pointed out, in raising the shibboleth of sectarianism, Weisbord was in actuality trying to reconcile Left Oppositionists with a right wing tendency that had, after all, articulated no fundamental political differences with the Communist Party that expelled it. All of this proceeded under the guise of bringing the League out of its ostensible isolation. The inevitable outcome would be the suppression of the Left Opposition’s very basis for existence, its critical interrogation of where the Comintern had gone wrong. Against Weisbord’s claim that a bloc with the Lovestoneites would better enable the Left Opposition to resist Stalinist violence, Cannon rightly quipped, “And who, may we ask, will help us to resist the underworld methods of the Lovestone gang? Doesn’t Weisbord know that we first encountered ‘violent’ tactics from the Lovestone faction, when it was at the head of the party and that we learned to resist them on our own resources?”

ican Trotskyism, 87; Cannon to Dunne, published as “Signs of a Crisis,” in Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches*, 1928–31, 289–295. Weisbord and O’Flaherty clearly kept in touch and were on good terms. See “New Publication,” *Class Struggle*, 1 (May 1931), in which O’Flaherty’s satirical wit is praised and his new Cleveland publication *The Wasp* given a plug. For a more critical discussion of O’Flaherty’s freelancing and his relations with Weisbord see Communist League of America, National Executive Committee, Minutes, 3 July 1931, Box 35, Folder 5, GB Papers. The CLA Executive Committee Minutes for early 1931 contain much commentary on Weisbord’s incompatibility with the Left Opposition. See, for instance, entries in the Minutes relating to Weisbord for 12 January 1931; 19 January 1931; 9 March 1931; 13 April 1931, Box 35, Folder 5, GP Papers.

Perhaps Cannon's most pointed criticisms were reserved for Weisbord's fetishism of "mass work." As Cannon's speech notes reveal, he took Weisbord to task for what constituted something of a megalomaniacal approach to the class struggle: "Passaic proved one man can do mass work." Against this maxim, Cannon argued that what Passaic had proven was that "a Party can do mass work." This, of course, was not unrelated to Cannon's insistence that the Communist Party's mass base could not be written off as "idiots, fools, and dupes," but must, instead, be won back to Leninism by the Left Opposition. Insisting that the CLA was by no means opposed to conducting mass, independent work in the trade union sector, Cannon nevertheless remained firm that there were no quick fixes in this challenging project. The major task of the Left Opposition, as a small group working in abnormally difficult circumstances, was to prepare, plan, and develop "activity to set masses of workers in motion along lines which will heighten their consciousness." This meant counter-posing the principles of the Left Opposition against the capitalist enemy, ensconced conservative trade union officialdoms, and the obfuscations and worse of the Stalinists and other critics, whose inclinations could appear to be of the left at the same time that they followed rightward trajectories. The road to such activism necessarily lay through the existing organizations of the working class, replete with their deficiencies, including the supposed vanguard itself, the CPUSA. When "mass work" took on the trappings of Weisbord's sloganeering, it was not coincidental that this demagoguery was "always followed by capitulation to the Stalinists or by capitulation in principle to the right wing." This meant that the Trotskyists were fated to be typecast as "sectarian," "passive," doing "no mass work." So be it, insisted Cannon, for there was no shortcut to successful revolutionary work.

Refusing to swallow Weisbord's pejorative dismissals of the Left Opposition as a failure because "nothing of importance has happened," Cannon pointed out that two years' work had produced a *beginning*: "an object lesson to the communist workers in how to fight for principle against slander and persecution, how to swim against the stream." That beginning was premised on a fundamental perspective: "we are in no way opposed to general activity in the class struggle; we only refuse to accept an opportunist formula for it; and we refuse to alter our conception of the main task of the Opposition at the moment – propaganda to win over the workers vanguard."

Cannon's polemical fusillade into the New York branch brought most of those gravitating towards Weisbord back to their Left Oppositional senses. Cannon wrote to Vincent Ray Dunne: "When the smoke cleared there was nothing left of the Weisbord faction, and the hero himself left the hall under a volley of questions from us which he refused to answer. All the comrades who had been caucusing with him, with the possible exception of one, changed their position

in the course of the discussion, and the branch is solidly united now in support of the National Committee." To Swabeck, Cannon concluded that he thought too many concessions were made to Weisbord under the guise of a democratic opening up of the League to different perspectives. "We got more criticism than praise for printing Weisbord's belchings," he noted gruffly.⁶³

Cannon may have been overly sanguine about how the New York branch rallied to his standard against Weisbord. To be sure, CLA support for Weisbord was weakened dramatically. Yet Cannon was not done with Weisbord. Blocked from entering the Communist League of America, Weisbord, who gathered around himself a small New York-based group, extended his position that he was "for Trotsky but against the American Trotskyites." Weisbord was particularly antagonistic to the recognized leaders of the CLA, Cannon and Shachtman. He wrote to one Philadelphia Left Oppositionist that, "The Cannons and Shachtmans must be driven out of the entire communist and labor movements ... And it will be our job to do it too. Such people are not Communists. They are scum." A new organization headed by Weisbord appeared on 15 March 1931, christened the Communist League of Struggle [CLS]. It proclaimed itself as "adhering to the International Left Opposition." A journal, *Class Struggle*, appeared shortly thereafter. As Cannon noted:

While we were proclaiming the necessity of propagandizing the members and sympathizers of the Communist Party as a link to the mass movement, Weisbord, proclaiming a program of mass activity, directed 99 percent of his mass activity not at the masses, and not even at the Communist Party, but at our little Trotskyist group. He disagreed with us on everything and denounced us as false representatives of Trotskyism. When we said yes, he said, yes positively. When we said 75, he raised the bid. When we said, 'Communist League of America', he called his group 'Communist League of Struggle' to make it stronger.

Researching his two-volume *The Conquest of Power* (1937) at the New York Public Library, Weisbord grappled with the movements he considered central to the

63 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon to Dunne, published as "Signs of A Crisis," Cannon to Swabeck, 31 December 1931, and Cannon's speech on behalf of the National Committee, published as "Our Policy and Present Tasks," 23 December 1930, both in Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928–31*, 289–312, 406; James P. Cannon, Speech Notes to "Weisbord Question – 1931: Reply to Discussion on Report to Branch on Our Tasks, 29 December 1930," and "Lecture, Jan 31, 1931: Labor Temple: Can the Left Opposition Make a Bloc with the Right Wing," Reel 32, JPC Papers; "Exit Weisbord," *The Militant*, 15 January 1931; "Weisbord and the Liquidators," *The Militant*, 1 February 1931.

history of the modern workers' movement: liberalism, anarchism, syndicalism, socialism, communism, and fascism. He took a break from his daily routine of reading and note-taking to undertake a European trip, funded by his followers for the purpose of conducting discussions with Trotsky in Prinkipo. "By god, the next thing we hear is that he went to see Trotsky in Turkey," exclaimed Cannon incredulously when reminiscing about Weisbord forty years later.⁶⁴

Trotsky did his best to reorient Weisbord to the politics of the Left Opposition, but his criticisms seemed not to register. Weisbord's wife Vera, for instance, remembered only that Trotsky "was eager for us to unite with the CLA," neglecting to mention that such a rapprochement was broached as a possibility only if it could be achieved on the basis of the politics of the Left Opposition as articulated in the United States by the Communist League of America. As early as June 1931, Trotsky and the International Secretariat of the ILO made it abundantly clear that the Weisbord Group was a confused political formation that did not properly grasp the nature of the Communist Parties affiliated with the Communist International, how to orient to them, and how to engage in mass work and united front campaigns. "I cannot adopt your standpoint," Trotsky wrote to Weisbord in October 1931, "Your criticism of the American League seems to me one-sided, artificial, and terribly exaggerated. You throw the League and the right wing together, which shows that you utterly disregard the fitness of things. You make fun of the publishing activity of the League and counter-pose your 'mass action' to it. ... If the solidarity of ideas means anything to you, you must build a bridge back to the League." The International Left Opposition, Trotsky later lectured Weisbord, was not some kind of "Noah's ark," and the Communist League of Struggle needed to rethink a set of issues, among them its fundamental eclecticism, which allowed it to promote a bloc with the Lovestone right wing. On international questions, such as the nature of Stalinism and the problematic policies associated with the Chinese Revolution, Weisbord's group needed to come to some basic understandings. "Before all you must keep clearly in mind that the road to the International Left Opposition leads through the American League," Trotsky wrote to Weisbord's Communist League of Struggle in May 1932, "a second road does not exist."⁶⁵ Within the CLA,

64 See Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 88; Ring interview, 17 October 1973; "Weisbord: Cult of Confusionism," *The Militant*, 15 May 1931; "Weisbord – No Comment!" reprinting Albert Weisbord to Comrade Morgenstern, 6 July 1931, *The Militant*, 1 August 1931; Weisbord, *A Radical Life*, esp. 302–307.

65 Weisbord, *A Radical Life*, 307; "Resolution of the International Secretariat on the Weisbord Group," *The Militant*, 1 June 1931; Trotsky to Weisbord, 11 October 1931, in George Breitman and Sarah Lovell, ed., *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1930–1937]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973),

as the National Committee minutes of 1932–33 attest, Weisbord was a constant thorn in the side of an already overly tender body politic.⁶⁶

The whirlwind continued throughout 1932–34, with Weisbord and the Communist League of Struggle negotiating, often through direct contact with Trotsky, to effect a fusion with the Communist League of America. Trotsky complicated matters because, while he could easily discern through a reading of the basic documentary record the politics of difference that separated the CLS from the CLA and the International Left Opposition, his personal relations with the often dynamic Weisbord were far more suggestive of openings and possibilities of collaboration.

“I must admit that Weisbord has made a much more favorable impression on me personally than by means of his letters and articles,” Trotsky wrote to the National Committee of the CLA in May 1932, adding that, “it appears to me that Weisbord’s group is already prepared now to join the League, if the conditions are not too ‘debasings’. Don’t you think that after a sharp condemnation of the theoretical and tactical mistakes of this group on my part you can then open up a bridge” Even Trotsky succumbed to Weisbord’s fast talk on “mass action,” being drawn to the appeal of this critique of the League after hearing negative reports of stagnation in the Left Opposition from Albert Glotzer: “Perhaps something in Weisbord’s criticism in connection with ‘mass actions’ is not so false as the other parts of his criticism.”

333–334; and Trotsky to the CLA, 22 May 1932; Trotsky to Weisbord, 13 October 1932; Trotsky to NC, CLA, 20 October 1932, all in Breitman and Lovell, eds., *Writings of Leon Trotsky* [1932], 104–109, 236, 255–257. See also, *Class Struggle*, 2 (August 1932), which contains Trotsky’s letter to the CLS and “Our Reply to Comrade Trotsky.” Glotzer, writing to Shachtman from Turkey where he was visiting Trotsky in October 1931 noted that Trotsky had “finally answered Weisbord’s many letters and documents. ... I think that all of you will agree that it just about settles the ‘paranoic’ Weisbord.” See Glotzer to Shachtman, 24 October 1931, Reel 20, JPC Papers.

- 66 See, for instance, CLA, National Committee Minutes, 20 January 1932; 21 July 1932; 25 August 1932; 1 September 1932; 12 September 1932; 6 October 1932, esp. attachment, Weisbord to Secretary, New York Branch, Secretary, National Committee, CLA, [no date, September – October 1932?]; 24 October 1932; 23 November 1932; 18 March 1933; 3 April 1933, esp. attachment “Resolution of the Joint Conference of Representatives of the Communist League of America (Opposition) and the Communist League of Struggle”; 7 April 1933; 23 November 1933, all in Box 35, Folders 6 & 9, GB Papers. See also CLA, *Internal Bulletin*, Number 5 [no date, 1932], which contains a great deal on Weisbord. For an initial 1931 rejection of Weisbord see “Conference Acts on Weisbord,” *The Militant*, 10 October 1931. There is a brief discussion of Weisbord-CLA relations in Myers, *The Prophet’s Army*, 56–58, and also in William Isaacs, “Contemporary Marxian Political Movements in the U.S.,” (Unpublished PhD dissertation, New York University, 1940), 683–684.

A series of abortive attempts to bring the two groups together followed. They were broken off in October 1932 and, again, in December 1933, Cannon having written to Swabeck in April 1933 that there was an agreement to collaborate with Weisbord and this might well result in fusion of the CLA and the CLS. Trotsky finally ended in January 1934 what Cannon, Shachtman, and the rest of the CLA National Committee no doubt regarded as an unfortunate waste of time. The last straw, as far as the CLA was concerned, occurred in November 1933, with Weisbord publicly attacking the Communist League of America, developing a counter orientation to trade union activity, and CLS members physically assaulting their CLA opponents. Cannon and Shachtman drew up a declaration denouncing the Weisbord group's hooliganism, breaking off all relations with the Communist League of Struggle. If Trotsky continued to think that collaboration with Weisbord might take place under certain conditions, he was insistent that the CLA had to struggle with all of those affiliated with the CLS over "the senselessness of Weisbord's positions."⁶⁷

As Shachtman wrote to his factional supporters in November 1932, anytime the CLA entered into direct discussions with Weisbord, the results were universally disappointing: refusals, obfuscations, and verbal violence were never far from the surface of negotiations. In Chicago, regardless of factional lineups, all CLA members were "unalterably opposed to Weisbord and his ilk," most of them questioning Trotsky's ill-advised interventions that seemed, across the Atlantic, to be shoring up a politically sinking vessel. Cannon agreed, writing to Vincent Ray Dunne that in dealing independently with Weisbord, Trotsky

67 The above paragraphs draw on Trotsky to National Committee, CLA, 19 May 1932, appended to CLA, National Committee Minutes, 19 May 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GP Papers; "Resolution of the Joint Conference of Representatives of the Communist League of America (Opposition) and the Communist League of Struggle," appended to CLA, National Committee Minutes, 3 April 1933; 23 November 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers; Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism: A Documented Analysis, 1929-1985* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 771-773; Cannon to Swabeck, April 1933, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932-1934*, 246-248; "Joint Meet of League and Weisbord Lays Ground for Close Collaboration," *The Militant*, 8 April 1933; and, on Trotsky's ultimate assessment of Weisbord, a variety of documents, statements, and quotations from *Dog Days*, esp. 345-349, 606, 651; Trotsky to Glotzer, 12 February 1934, in Leon Trotsky, *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement II, 1934-1940* (New York: Pathfinder, 1979), 447-448; "Our Answer to the Statement of the National Committee of the Communist League of America (Opposition)," *Class Struggle*, 2 (October 1932); "Negotiations with the Communist League of America," *Class Struggle*, 3 (May 1933). Weisbord finally broke decisively from Trotsky in 1934 over the question of entryism. See Weisbord, "We Break With Trotsky," *Class Struggle*, 4 (November 1934), but Trotsky had already acquiesced to the CLA's unanimous view that Weisbord could not be assimilated to the Left Opposition.

misjudged and inflated “the importance of this mountebank.” Occasionally the CLA had to publicly criticize Weisbord for elementary lapses of revolutionary behavior, as in January 1932, when he subjected some former members of his group who had split away to a civil suit claiming damages arising out of their ostensible theft of volumes from the Communist League of Struggle’s library. Two youths, whom Weisbord identified as among the expelled CLSers accused of stealing the organization’s books, ended up affiliated with the New York youth club associated with the CLA, applying for membership to the main body. Much was made of this by Weisbord in the Communist League of Struggle’s polemical broadsides. The outspoken dissident insisted on portraying the possible admission of these former CLS members to the CLA as a sinister plot to poison the ongoing unity discussions between the two groups, pointing a finger of blame directly at those opposed to a possible fusion. They were, Weisbord wrote, “using these two worthies to prevent the wishes of Comrade Trotsky from being carried out and unification affected.” If the CLA admitted such “LUMPEN elements” to its ranks, thereby “turning the American League into a veritable garbage can,” it would signal nothing less than “the greatest hostility to the Communist League of Struggle,” showing “that the American League condones the tactics of Lovestone and the Party of wrecking and destroying of workers headquarters.”

An imprisoned marine worker who had been defended by both the CLS and the CLA, Thomas Bunker, wrote to Cannon from Ossining, dismissing Weisbord as “98% phoney,” adding that, “The raid on his loft is a story in itself, but what has that to do with the American League.” Shachtman recognized Weisbord’s “tremendous capacity for work,” but he was under no illusions that this energy was not “outweighed by other negative features.” The best possible circumstance was to absorb Weisbord into the political stream of the Opposition, modulating his negative features, and allowing the CLA to advance on the basis of what it could gain from admitting a talented, but mercurial, figure. These good intentions were never realized. Weisbord, unable to translate his 1930s rhetoric of mass work into anything approximating his accomplishments in Passaic and Gastonia, was never admitted to the CLA, and eventually disbanded the Communist League of Struggle in 1937. He then took up paid work as an American Federation of Labor organizer, abandoning revolutionary politics.⁶⁸

68 The above paragraphs draw on Glotzer to Shachtman, 2 November 1932, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers; “A Sorry Adventure,” “Internal Problems of the CLA,” and “Weisbord Blows the Whistle,” in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–34*, 29–30, 49, 111–112, and n. 60, 415, which relates to CLA-Weisbord discussions; and the extensive

8 Branch Bickerings: New York Cliquism and Youth Recruits

Weisbord brought divergent elements of the CLA together, and Cannon and Swabeck would write in March 1932 that “these struggles exerted a certain unifying influence.” At the level of superficial League relations it may even have seemed that the highly personalized antagonism to Cannon festering over 1929–30 faded into the background. Shachtman, writing to Trotsky in March 1932, noted that while the League had indeed experienced bad times since 1930, “we have also had long stretches when a very satisfactory collaboration among all the leading comrades was established.” Cannon corresponded with Vincent Ray Dunne about how Weisbord pushed him close to Shachtman, although the latter’s former allies were somewhat distant from the fray:

The necessity of establishing some kind of working relation with what was left of ‘Cannon’ then suggested itself to Shachtman, since there were no others. I met him more than half way, and together we soon began to pull the League out of the hole. When the Weisbord fight came along and really began to threaten the existence of the New York branch – as such things can be expected at any time in a dynamic political movement – the importance of the collaboration manifested itself very sharply. The absolute identity of the ‘anti-Cannon’ agitation with an attempt to disrupt the League was as clear as was the necessity for me to lead and organize the

documentary record that includes much on Weisbord in this period in *Dog Days*, esp. Trotsky to National Committee, CLA, 20 October 1932; Shachtman to Trotsky, 31 October 1932; Shachtman to a Comrade, 26 November 1932; Transcript of a Discussion Between Trotsky and Swabeck, 27 February 1933; Shachtman, Response on Organizational Questions; Trotsky to Shachtman, 30 January 1934, esp. 345–360, 460–461, 497, 606, and n. 549, 651. The CLA response to Weisbord’s organization and journal is “Weisbord: Cult of Confusionism,” *The Militant*, 15 May 1931 and for the International Secretariat, “Resolution of the International Secretariat on the Weisbord Group,” *The Militant*, 1 June 1931. Vera Buch Weisbord’s *A Radical Life* betrays deep animosities to Cannon that have colored her historical memory. She alleges that “the Cannon group always referred to us disparagingly and finally raided our headquarters and stole our Marxist library” (302). This obviously misstates the nature of the burglary, which was – as Albert Weisbord himself acknowledged in his civil suit and in correspondence with the CLA – the work of former, expelled members of the Communist League of Struggle. See “Our Headquarters Raided – Wreckers Protected by Cannon,” *Class Struggle*, 1 (December 1931); “A Sorry Adventure” cited above and Thomas Bunker to Cannon, 27 September 1932, Reel 3, JPC Papers; CLA, National Committee Minutes, 20 January 1932; 6 October 1932, including attachment, Weisbord to Secretary, New York Branch, Secretary, National Committee, CLA [no date, September – October 1932?], Box 32, File 7, GP Papers. Weisbord, *A Radical Life*, mentions Bunker briefly (304).

fight against Weisbord. I did not concede an inch to Weisbord's campaign against our 'tradition', on the contrary, I took that as the starting point and proceeded from it Shachtman, in a serious contest with a political enemy of the League, found it necessary to fight along the same lines. Then Swabeck came to New York, and the three of us pulling together steered the League through the most gratifying and substantial progress it has yet recorded. There wasn't much room in that situation – the absence of the others did not seem to materially affect the progress – for the kind of agitation that preceded the first Plenum and took place in a muffled form there.

For all the appearances of a common front, however, resentment against Cannon did not dissipate.⁶⁹

On the contrary, anti-Cannonism continued, most particularly in the New York local, where Abern may well have been consolidating a circle of newly-recruited youth. At precisely the point that Cannon picked up the political cudgels once again, the CLA embarked on an "Expansion Program," promising that *The Militant* would again become a weekly, and expanding its membership, especially in New York. As Swabeck told Trotsky in 1933, "During this period elements came over to us who otherwise might not have done so; they came primarily for literary reasons – of course, not all of them." Many of these youthful recruits associated with the Shachtman-Abern axis, and were likely to get their fill of insider grousing. Much of this turned on Jim Cannon. He was "an opportunist, he was really a right-winger for whom Trotskyism was a pretext, he was lazy, etc." Cannon seemed, to some, above it all, explaining patiently that he had indeed experienced a rough personal patch in the recent past, but that the important thing was to understand and adhere to political principles which, after all, were the foundation on which the CLA rested. He thought the New York branch something of a magnet for undisciplined, petty-bourgeois, dilettantish types, many of whom were barely out of their teens, but who were treated in the young and small organization as full, and responsible, members. Not all of the League's youth gravitated to Shachtman and Abern in these years. Some of the most dedicated and talented – Sam Gordon, George Clarke, Tom Stamm – were schooled by Cannon as organizers and functionaries, thrown into certain tasks for which they showed an aptitude, just as a very green Jim

69 Cannon and Swabeck, "Internal Problems of the CLA," 22 March 1932, in Stanton and Taber, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 49; Shachtman to Trotsky, "A Bad Situation in the American League," 13 March 1932, in *Dog Days*, 170–173; Cannon to Dunne, 21 April 1932, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

Cannon was once assigned by his Wobbly mentor, Vincent St. John, to direct involvements in the class struggle.⁷⁰

Youth drawn to Cannon soon found themselves taking on editorial responsibility for *The Militant* as Shachtman and Abern absented themselves in pique. These “Cannonite” recruits were sent out to Youngstown, Cleveland, Springfield, or Philadelphia to develop locals or report on the Left Opposition’s health. In contrast, younger CLAers schooled in anti-Cannonism in the New York branch excelled in talk and writing. Shachtman may well have been regarded more warmly by some of these New York youth, inclined as they were to lean in literary directions, but he did not have Cannon’s caretaker interest in their development as professional revolutionaries. Rather, he loved the verbal debating, which allowed him to roast fallacious arguments over his often sarcastic coals, or show off his deep store of arcane historical knowledge. Emanuel (Manny) Geltman felt that while he “was closer to Shachtman,” he nonetheless “learned more from Cannon.” Still, there were those youth less interested in being trained in revolutionary activism than they were in displaying their cleverness. Cannon remembered that, “One had to be patient for the sake of the future; that is why we listened to the windbags. It was not easy. ... We had fierce quarrels and squabbles, very often over little things. ... Our difficulties were increased by the fact that many recruits were not first class material. Many of the people who joined the New York branch weren’t there by justice. They weren’t the type who, in the long run, could build a revolutionary movement.” Less charitably, Cannon could typecast “the lunatic fringe” drawn to all new, and marginalized, social movements: “Freaks always looking for the most extreme expression of radicalism, misfits, ... chronic oppositionists who had been thrown out of half a dozen organizations – such people began to come to us in our isolation, shouting, ‘Hello Comrades.’” Even Shachtman had to concur, noting the unstable character of those drawn to the New York CLA: “more than a few dilettantes, well-meaning blunderers, biological chatterboxes, ultra-radical oat-sowers, unattachable wanderers, and many other kinds of sociological curiosa.”⁷¹

⁷⁰ See Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, esp. 57–60.

⁷¹ “The International Must Apply the Brakes: Transcript of a Discussion Between Trotsky and Swabeck,” 27 February 1933 in *Dog Days*, 457; Geltman quoted in Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 43; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 91–94; Max Shachtman, “25 Years of American Trotskyism,” *New International*, 20 (January – February 1954), 18; Sam Gordon in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 60–63; Ring interview, 8 March 1974. It was not only Cannon who was critical of some of the non-proletarian elements drawn to the revolutionary left. See James Oneal and G.A. Werner, *American Communism: A Critical Analysis of its Origins, Development, and Proposals* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1947), 221: “Like phantoms,

This brought out the worst in Cannon, who had a tendency to associate working-class character with virtue. He hardened in his insistence that the natural leadership of the Communist League of America was an organic development, in which the proletarian kernel of the Workers (Communist) Party was prepared for its place under the banner of the International Left Opposition. This was an example of what Trotsky later criticized as the dangerous inclination to search for political and explanatory “detours, so to speak, in organizational-personal questions.”⁷² Cannon actually proposed, over the course of a series of heated 1932–33 exchanges, to “admit only bona fide proletarians to membership” in the New York branch for a period of six months, hoping that this would put the local on a firmer political footing. Notes for an internal speech delivered in 1932 record Cannon’s emphatic advocacy of “closing of the doors of the NY branch to all but bona-fide workers, connected with workers organizations.”⁷³

Cannon began to speak, in private correspondence to allies, of expulsions as a form of “housecleaning,” complaining that “we have a hell of a lot of deadwood in the League.” He saw this as a consequence of “too many purely literary recruits” and the resulting “abnormal and necessarily transitory grouping”

these deflated professionals and intellectuals pass from one group to another. ... To play with ‘proletarian dictatorship’ is fun and a good thrill is obtained by following the current trends and discussing the latest change in the parent party line as it arrives from Moscow. They are playboys at revolution, those who enjoy the intoxication of vicarious fighting on the barricades with little risk to themselves.”

72 Cannon first elaborated the gestation notion in “Character and Limits of Our Faction,” *The Militant*, 10 May 1930. Shachtman would subsequently develop a strong rejection of this theory, articulated most clearly in “25 Years of American Trotskyism,” 14–22. In the initial period of his break from the Workers (Communist) Party with Abern and Cannon, however, Shachtman had himself espoused a mild variant of this view. Writing to Glotzer and referring to the Communist-affiliated Young Workers League, Shachtman wrote that “I am sure that all the comrades in the League who have been associated with the best memories – almost traditions – of our joint fight will, one after the other, join with us in the fight in the coming period of time.” See Shachtman to Glotzer, 24 November 1928, Reel 20, JPC Papers. Trotsky’s criticism appears in “The International Must Apply the Brakes: Transcript of a Discussion Between Trotsky and Swabeck,” 27 February 1933. Cannon’s defensiveness in the face of rather blunt repudiations of the importance of the break he led from Stalinism grew over the course of 1930–32. See, for instance, Cannon, “The Leading Cadre and Its Traditions, 1932,” in “Speeches and Writings, 1932–1933,” Box 27/Reel 33, JPC Papers.

73 See National Committee Resolution [1933], Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers; “Resolution on the Proletarianization of the New York Branch,” [February 1933], in *Dog Days*, 416–417; Cannon, “Reply to Discussion, 1932,” in “Speeches and Writings, 1932–1933,” Box 27/Reel 33, JPC Papers.

coalescing around Shachtman and Abern. Within this clique the howls of derision grew loud. "My ears already reverberate to the senatorial thunder and sly innuendo of the aforementioned Comrade C[annon] dilating for the n'th time on the *soi-disant* struggle between the honest proletarians and the petty-bourgeois intellectuals," Spector wrote to Shachtman from Toronto. "What a future to contemplate," Spector fumed, replete as it would be with the "undenurable provincialism" of Cannon carrying on "his traditional argument with the IWW" as he "chew[ed] the cud of inanities." Glotzer was apparently capable of sneering, when discussions of Cannon's leadership grew heated, that there were "some lessons from C[anon], but not many." In the New York branch meeting where the proletarianization resolution was discussed, Cannon claimed comrades were on the verge of fisticuffs, and one young CLAer accused the "demagogic" founder of the Left Opposition of "practicing Stalinism." A suggestion was made that the CLA headquarters be transferred to Chicago where, in Cannon's words, it would be possible to put "a firm proletarian base under the National Committee."

Cannon's tendency to resolve political issues organizationally was in fact a hangover from his days in the factionalized Workers (Communist) Party. This undoubtedly reduced his stature among critics and, as Shachtman and his supporters offered reasoned opposition to what they considered "an open 'campaign' against so-called 'alien elements' in the League," the Cannon resolution on proletarian admission was rejected. In private communications with Swabeck, Trotsky would later fault "the organizational policy of the majority of the central committee." In the case of the Cannon resolution to restrict admission to the New York branch on the basis of class place, Trotsky thought the initiative "a mistake not in its general tendency but in its mechanical approach ... and the manifestly practical hopelessness of the proposal under the given conditions." A wooden administrative solution to an obviously complex political problem was not, in Trotsky's view, an option destined to produce much in the way of positive results.⁷⁴

74 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon, "Reply to Discussion, 1932," in "Speeches and Writings, 1932-1933," Box 27/Reel 33, JPC Papers; "Resolution on the Proletarianization of the New York Branch," and "Reject the Proposal on the Proletarianization of the New York Branch," in *Dog Days*, 416-420, as well as the brief discussion of the issue on 62, and Shachtman to Trotsky, "A Bad Situation in the American League," 172. Note for Cannon correspondence on the issue, Cannon to Swabeck, "The Situation is Becoming Impossible," 31 December 1931, in Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928-1931*, 404-407; Cannon to Gordon, 5 November 1932, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Cannon to Swabeck, 11 February 1933, published as "External Advances, Internal Turmoil," in Stanton and Taber, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932-1934*, 209-212; and for examples of derision

Shachtman's and Abern's tendencies were no more wholesome. Cannon's 1929–30 retreat brought out, not the best, but the worst in his former factional allies. Shachtman, himself maturing into a true Left Opposition leader in the context of a critique of both the American Party and the Comintern that necessarily stressed *international* as opposed to *national* issues, came to see himself as outgrowing Cannon. The latter's strengths as a mass leader were not based so much on theoretical acumen, familiarity with foreign languages, and perceptive assessments of global developments, as on a record of agitational and organizational accomplishment congruent with the strengths and weaknesses of the United States working class. Now aware of how much Cannon had to learn from Trotsky and his criticisms of Stalinization, Shachtman in some ways reached past himself by trying to vault over Cannon. He apparently thought he could simply bypass all that Cannon represented. In doing this, of course, his appeal was primarily to those youth in the New York branch who lacked appreciation of Cannon's history and what it brought to and meant for the Left Opposition. As this critically important experience was buttressed by Cannon's growing understanding of Trotsky's writings, dismissing it was foolhardy. This was a dangerous slighting of an authority that was both earned and deserved, albeit never as merely a hereditary entitlement.

It was not only Cannon who saw Shachtman as getting rather big for his leadership bristles. Glotzer wrote to his friend and factional head about the damage he had done in the Chicago local, especially among the youth, who were looking for Shachtman to tell them about a recent trip to Turkey and discussion of League matters with Trotsky: "[Y]ou spent the whole evening ridiculing a lad who is ridiculous a good deal of the time, and as the comrades report, leaving him on the verge of tears, simply because you were or were not goaded on," Glotzer complained, adding for good measure that "you seem to get a sadistic pleasure out of ridiculing and humiliating some people. ... the comrades, whom you know to be extremely raw and inexperienced, were shocked." Glotzer urged his old comrade, "Max, cut it out. It only gives blockheads an opportunity for consuming the deification of demagogues."

Spector to Shachtman, 1 March 1932, Roll 10. Reel 3353, MS Papers; and Glotzer quoted on Cannon in Cannon, Rough Notes, "First Plenum Speech: 11 June 1932," Reel 33, JPC Papers. Note, finally, Trotsky to Swabeck, "Strictly Personal," 7 March 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; and, on Cannon being accused of "practicing Stalinism" and of "slamming the door in the face of the proletarian element," Unsigned letter [Hermann] to the Executive Committee of the New York Branch of the CLA (Opposition), undated, in National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 18 March 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers.

Abern lacked Shachtman's rhetorical and public sparring skills, as well as his intuitive grasp of political fundamentals. In the 1929–30 realignment of CLA leadership personnel, Abern shed old loyalties that, in the absence of a group constituted on the basis of clear political opposition, could only continue in a deformed way, a factional cliquism premised on personal animosities toward Cannon. Abern's placement as a leading office functionary, situated undeniably at the center of League organizational knowledge (often of the "insider" variant because of Abern's access to records and national correspondence), meant he was responsible for the financial and administrative order of the Left Opposition's publications/press and leading committees. Youth in the New York branch keen to be on the receiving end of gossip and intrigue would thus turn instinctively to Abern, whose personality accommodated their seemingly political, but in reality, apolitical needs. Art Sharon later remembered being inducted into the Abern circle through denigrations of Jim Cannon, who seemed distant and aloof. Marty Abern was praised as someone who had "all the merits that Jim lacked and more besides." He soon found himself "the recipient of lengthy onionskin letters which contained all the inside information on what was going on in New York and elsewhere." That these documents were "in part sheer gossip" made Sharon uneasy, but he was made to feel that they were "an organic part of party political life Those that received them enjoyed the feeling of being privy to the most important internal political information."

At their best, then, Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern complemented one another in bringing to communist politics a set of overlapping strengths. This they had done in the ILD and in their original break from Stalinism. At their worst, in the dog days of 1929–33, they accentuated each other's shortcomings. In the ultra-critical and often closed-confines atmosphere of a New York branch where the worst features of youth recruits might well be on display alongside the best, divergences of personality conditioned unfortunate consequences.⁷⁵ Abern, Shachtman, Spector, and Glotzer repudiated Cannon with a particular vengeance in the dog days. They also attacked a new layer of youthful recruits who became the favored organizers and operatives of their former factional leader. It is difficult not to see the rivalries and revolts at work within the CLA

75 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon, "Reply to discussion, 1932," in "Speeches and Writings, 1932–1933," Box 27/Reel 33, JPC Papers. Insightful commentary on Shachtman and Abern from Cannon's perspective appears in Ring interview, 13 February 1974; Art Sharon in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 85–87. For Glotzer's critique of Shachtman see Glotzer to Shachtman, 2 November 1932, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers. Note, as well, Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 42–43.

in this troubled period as having less to do with the politics of Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky, and more to do with the insights of Freud.

Three examples from a plethora of 1932–33 correspondence will suffice as indications of the nature of the conflict. Glotzer wrote to Shachtman, outraged at statements made by “Swabeck and Oehler on his royal highness [Cannon],” suggesting that this qualified them as “eligible to the cult of worshippers.” Worse yet for Left Oppositionists, the “statement ought to be sent to Moscow as a model for Bucharin, Rykov and Tomsy and how to pay respects to their chief.” Along the same lines, Shachtman wrote to Glotzer, depicting the factional struggle as one “between those who are striving to absorb and carry into life the ideas of the Left Opposition and those whose Bolshevism is a veneer beneath which the shoddy paint of Stalinism is thickly smeared.” To Spector, Shachtman described Cannon’s intransigence, commenting on Sam Gordon’s deformed relations with the domineering bureaucrat: “His position has become such in the organization that the slightest pinprick reveals the vindictive and subjective man underneath. He does not want to live under the same roof with any but those who are ready to assume the role of the Gordons, i.e., perfervid adulators, and I refuse to have any part of that role.”

As the sons felt that they had outgrown their father, they pushed for their rightful place of dominance, resentful of those newly born into the Cannon-Karsner family who displaced them. They grew increasingly impatient, indeed angry, with the patriarch who refused to step aside. Nowhere is this more evident than in the antagonisms of Shachtman and others towards figures like Sam Gordon. Living for a time with Cannon and Karsner, and arguably now one of Rose’s and Jim’s favored youth recruits, Gordon was apprenticing in Cannon’s understanding of the revolutionary craft. He quickly became the metaphorical son who, in the midst of emerging personal and political tensions, took up the place of Shachtman and Abern. The logic of this understandable, if strained, situation was that Shachtman and Abern would necessarily cultivate their own youthful circles.⁷⁶

76 This admittedly speculative interpretation draws on Gordon’s recollections in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 51–80. As examples only see Glotzer to Shachtman, 13 March 1932; Shachtman to Spector, 3 July 1932; Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers; Shachtman to Glotzer, 26 November 1932, Roll 11 Reel 3354, MS Papers. Retrospectively, Shachtman could appreciate the complexities of the issues involved in his separation from Cannon, understanding that an old vs young component existed in the process of distancing that went on in the dog days. See, for instance, “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” Oral History Research Office, No. 488, Columbia University, 1963, esp. 349–351, 326–335. Abern seemed poised, before a premature death, to bury old hatchets. See Ring interview, 23 February 1974.

Tensions simmering beneath a variety of surfaces boiled over in odd ways in February – March 1932. Two of the New York youth associated with Shachtman-Abern, Manny Geltman and Joseph Carter [Joseph Friedman], published relatively minor statements in *The Militant* and *Young Spartacus*, the Opposition's youth organ, in which Abern exercised a strong editorial hand. Geltman's review of a book on German workers' leader Ferdinand Lassalle and Carter's article, "Honor Bolshevik Leaders," raised the ire of Cannon and Swabeck. The Lassalle review was attacked as a false and flippant evaluation of an important, if flawed, figure in the pantheon of revolutionary actors, while Carter was assailed for having suggested that Rosa Luxemburg's endorsement of armed struggle had long been "proclaimed by Engels as outlived." *The Militant* went so far as to publish an apology for Geltman's commentary, closing with a protest "against the false evaluation" of its subject. It noted, as well, that care had to be taken "that such a movement as ours, which is obliged, especially under present conditions, to emphasize the critical side of its work, does not become a playground for smart-aleckism and parvenu self-assurance. Tendencies of this kind are to be seen now and then, especially among the youth." Swabeck's response to Carter, also published in *The Militant*, and headed "Uphold Our Revolutionary Classics!", insisted that Engels had never repudiated the tactics of class battle first clearly enunciated in *The Communist Manifesto*. It was necessary, Swabeck concluded, to "guard against" a "supercilious, know-it-all attitude which steps with both feet into the foul pollution of social reformism."

Shachtman waded into the fray, demanding the repudiation of Swabeck's article, as well as protesting the way it was published, which supposedly circumvented normal channels of CLA procedure. The League's National Youth Committee deplored Swabeck's "abusive, slanderous, and uncomradely language." Carter, known for being a thorn in the side of Cannon and Swabeck, pulled no punches. He refused to back down off of his argument, which related to editorial changes made to statements by Engels that served social democratic purposes in the 1890s, and he condemned the Swabeck rejoinder as "a shining example of an illogical, stupid, and puerile and dishonest piece of writing." Shachtman, in turn, reveled in depicting Swabeck and Cannon as ill-educated in the very Marxist debates they were all too quick to judge, his arguments taking an almost pedantic turn. Carter was, however, a less than exemplary foundation on which to build a factional opposition. Shachtman supporter John Edwards wrote from Chicago to complain that the New York youth leader suffered from "a swell head," noting that while he had "a fair scholastic knowledge of Marx ... he does not seem to be at home among proletarian revolutionists." Instead, Carter spent his time in Chicago hanging out with "one political and moral degenerate by the name of Tom O'Flaherty." O'Flaherty was

said to have his ear to the ground with respect to gossip about the CLA's internal problems that he was then "peddling to the Stalinites for revenge against the Central Committee." Edwards closed the discussion with a warning to Shachtman: "Your alliance with Carter [can] only hurt you."⁷⁷

The bickerings in the CLA around the Geltman and Carter writings may seem, retrospectively, a tempest in a teapot. Their meaning, however, loomed large. At stake was whether one of the founders of Marxism had in fact repudiated the necessity of revolutionary class struggle. Cannon undoubtedly saw the writings of Geltman and Carter as the visible, literary tip of an iceberg of cliquist alignments and unprincipled blocs united in their determination to freeze out of the leadership what was increasingly being constructed as a degenerating old guard, with rightist political leanings.⁷⁸ Shachtman saw the fight as one of "bureaucratic attitude" rather than "Shachtmanism" or "Carterism." In his representation of the Cannon camp's position, Shachtman refused to agree that the struggle was one of binary oppositions: proletariat vs. petty bourgeois/young upstarts vs old, experienced, stable leaders. Rather, what constantly emerged in Shachtman's critique was bureaucratism and its apparent sense of hereditary leadership. What brought a variety of forces together in New York in 1931–32 was not a common program, however, for on important *political* issues there was no basis of unity. Carter, for instance, known for supporting Weisbord on certain matters, gathered around him a youthful grouping that was nonetheless unable to come to agreement on a series of important international questions. But they largely endorsed, against a National Committee that included Shachtman and Cannon, an understanding of Left Opposition youth clubs that would function, Weisbord-like, as open forums admitting Lovestoneites, Stalinists, and others. Carter, Cannon insisted, saw the Weisbord whirlwind as a politically opportune moment to "sharpen his attacks on the

77 On the controversy outlined in the above paragraphs see M. Gtn, "Book Review: Lassalle," *The Militant*, 30 January 1932; Joseph Carter, "Honor Bolshevik Leaders," *Young Spartacus*, January 1932; "Public Apology for Article on Lassalle," Cannon and Swabeck, "Internal Problems of the CLA," 22 March 1932, both in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–34*, 31–32, 49–73; Swabeck, "Uphold Our Revolutionary Classics!" 5 March 1932 and Shachtman, "Statement on Uphold Our Revolutionary Classics!" 12 March 1932, in *Dog Days*, 153–169; "Statement of Comrade Carter to the National Committee, 5 March 1932 on Comrade Swabeck's Article in *The Militant*," appended to CLA, National Committee Minutes, 7 March 1932; Minutes, 15 March 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers; John Edwards to Shachtman, 16 April 1932, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers. Carter is discussed briefly in Myers, *The Prophet's Army*, 55–56.

78 Cannon's harsh views on Carter are perhaps developed most forthrightly in "Plenum Speech, 13 June 1932," in "Speeches and Writings, 1932–1933," Box 27/Reel 33, JPC Papers.

National Committee." Even more seasoned CLA leaders – Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer – could not come together on all issues, but relied, as did many of the youth, on a crude, personalized "united front" against Cannon and his ilk.

As Cannon wrote to Oehler who, from his Chicago base, asked for clarification as to what was at stake in the endless bickering emanating from the New York resident committee of the national center: "We, and those comrades who support us, are a unit on all the important questions, both with regard to internal and external policy. The others are united completely on only one point, and that has nothing to do with communist politics: a common antagonism to us. ... They can not win over the radical workers to the Opposition merely by cursing Cannon." Cannon stressed to Oehler that as far back as 1925, in the factional struggles in the Workers (Communist) Party, it had become apparent that it was necessary to "liberate ourselves from these unprincipled feuds and to approach questions from a political standpoint. Let us not forget the road we traveled by."

Old vs young was, for Cannon, if not an irrelevant question, a secondary one. He had little time for those who lived with parents, had no responsibilities, imposed on their families, and found the notion of work for the revolutionary organization without ample wages alien. These "unterrified students" he thought a poor base to appeal to and rely upon, and he castigated Shachtman's defense of them as "the most valuable forces for the future." This did not mean Cannon denigrated youth, but that he saw the need to train the young and to allow them to demonstrate their revolutionary commitment and capabilities. "Special attention should be given to the prospect of serious candidates for leadership from youth that are being attracted to our banner," he wrote to Vincent Dunne. "But I for one am going to fight to the last ditch against the idea of mere students graduating from the classroom to the leadership of the movement. They must show what they are made of first. They must prove that communism is in their blood as well as in their heads." Suggesting that revolution could be bypassed, and claiming authority for this position through Engels, was not the way that Cannon saw certain youth confirming their communism.⁷⁹

79 Among the vast documentation/correspondence that could be cited see Cannon and Swaback, "Internal Problems of the CLA," and two published Cannon letters to Vincent Ray Dunne and Hugo Oehler, which appeared as "The 'Degeneration of the Old Guard,'" 21 April 1932 and "The Anti-Cannon Bloc," 30 April 1932, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 49, 83–91, 101–107. Shachtman's representation is in Shachtman to Comrades, 26 November 1932, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers. Also see Cannon to Swaback, "The Situation is Becoming Impossible," 31 December 1931 in Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928–31*, 404–407 where Cannon raises

The infighting polarizing the New York branch had to come to an end, and this meant, in Cannon's view, the defeat of a youthful anti-leadership contingent that was being accommodated by factional cliquism:

The New York branch contains a number of nondescript apolitical elements whose heads are not shaped in such a way as to make it possible for them to assimilate communist ideas, especially in the sphere of organization. They are oppositionists 'in principle' and have drifted into the league by some accident or other. For a long time the leadership as a whole has had to combat them at meeting after meeting on the simplest and most obvious questions. They are always against 'the leadership' and their main thesis is that all politicians are fakers. The bloc makes a place for these elements and caters to their ignorance and prejudice in the fight against us.

Grievances of this kind would culminate in Cannon's suggestion that Shachtman was organizing "a faction against the National Committee on the 'worst possible basis,' the youth." He wrote to Vincent Ray Dunne in June 1932, spilling out his anger at the divisions that threatened to overwhelm the League:

Jealousies and all sorts of non-communist prejudices [are] appealed to, etc. The Shachtman-Abern caucus did this to the limit. I have had an opportunity to see a great variety of factionalism in my time but I must say quite coldly that I have never seen a dirtier, more dishonest, more demagogic and non-communist campaign than the one which has been waged by Shachtman-Abern-Glotzer ... In all this there is a warning for the future and we will not be true to the movement if we forget it. Every backward, prejudiced and politically defective element has been appealed to by whatever kind of an argument that seemed necessary to the occasion or to the person. The result of this is the inevitable and already noticeable beginnings of a real political degeneration in the ranks of the comrades who have fallen victims to this caucus, which is in reality an unprincipled clique. We who have the sad experience of witnessing the political decomposition of the Foster group in the party after their split with us, must observe the same kind of a process now going on in a section of the

questions about the Chicago local and the suitability of some comrades for membership, both young and old. He attacked the "dilettante old soldier attitude" as well as youthful inadequacies and suggested that it might be necessary to "expel half a dozen people in order to clear the decks," if the "Chicago branch" did not "wake up and begin to behave more like a unit of a communist organization."

League. But with this difference: the class composition of the Foster group was more proletarian and it took longer to corrupt them.

Cannon's unguarded commentary to Dunne was characterized by political hyperbole, but it was also prescient, as future developments would reveal. In the immediate context of 1932, it struck an uncompromising antagonism to the "high school quibblers" gathered around Carter and the control this group exercised within the New York branch, with Shachtman's and Abern's connivance. "Can any kind of personal diplomacy lift the League out of the hole they are digging for it," Cannon kvetched to Dunne, noting that Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer had been flooding the country with "caucus agents ... spreading all kinds of old-wives tales to catch the unwary." From the hinterland, an unsuspecting Barney Mass, relocated from Detroit to Los Angeles, wrote Cannon that "Marty's [Abern] re-association with the youth is reminiscent of old times."⁸⁰

The old guard/young Turk antagonisms that had erupted in the New York branch threatened to surface elsewhere. Albert Glotzer undertook a February – March 1932 national tour, ostensibly to report on his recent trip to Europe. In the major cities where the Left Opposition had branches, Glotzer engaged in discussions with leading cadre. Out of this came criticisms of "older comrades" in Minneapolis. They were chastened by Glotzer for not "playing the role that falls upon their shoulders; instead the burden of the work fell to the younger comrades and to an extent upon new comrades." Dissatisfied with the initiatives of Vincent Ray Dunne and Carl Skoglund in the coal yards, Glotzer questioned their general orientation as insufficiently attentive to the more proletarian helpers and deplored, on spurious grounds, their "fraternization with the bosses," calling for the National Committee to answer for the "gross error" unfolding in the Twin Cities. This kind of exaggerated revolutionary posturing, so foreign to Cannon's counseling of young organizers like Sam Gordon, Tom Stamm, and George Clarke, appeared in other quarters as well.⁸¹

80 Cannon to Oehler, "The Anti-Cannon Bloc," 30 April 1932, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 104; Mass to Cannon, 8 November 1931; Cannon to Vincent Ray Dunne, June 1932; Cannon to Gordon, 5 November 1932; J. Sifakis to Cannon, 16 January 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

81 On Glotzer's national tour and Minneapolis criticism, as well as counter replies, see CLA, National Committee Minutes, 27 January 1932; 18 April 1932; 25 April, 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers; Albert Glotzer, "Report on National Tour," 11 April 1932, Arne Swabeck, "The Organizational Status of the CLA," 18 April 1932, and Carl Skoglund to National Committee, "The Coal Drivers in Minneapolis," 18 April 1932, all in *Dog Days*, 197–208, 212–218. Contrast the superior tone of Glotzer with Cannon's admonitions to Clarke, who had been sent to work among the Illinois miners, where older comrades like Jack Carmody and Joe

Shachtman and Company, for instance, hoisted CLA Philly-mainstay and Cannon loyalist Bernard Morgenstern on the petard of party discipline for ostensibly violating revolutionary proletarian ethics in allowing himself to be married by a rabbi, this kind of religious ceremony contravening the rules of the Left Opposition. Morgenstern was an alternate National Committee member who, on his release from jail after serving 90 days on a sedition charge arising out of his distribution of League literature on unemployment, consented to the ceremony as placation to his parents. Non-communists who had taken very little pleasure in their son's conversion to revolutionary politics at the age of seventeen, they pressured and undoubtedly guilted Morgenstern into an act he would later regret; while the rabbi's presence at his marriage embarrassed the young Philadelphia Left Oppositionist, it had not shaken his political convictions. Morgenstern apologized to the New York resident NC, explaining that his act had been one of sentimental weakness only and implied no "reconciliation with bourgeois ideology and religious superstition." The contrite Morgenstern agreed to accept whatever medicine the NC dosed out, and asked only that he be allowed to redeem himself by his future work for the movement. This was not enough. Shachtman and Abern insisted on Morgenstern's removal from the National Committee, and wanted the young Philadelphia militant's head. Morgenstern's crime was less the extent to which he compromised the revolutionary credentials of the CLA, than it was his unbreakable association with Cannon. As Morgenstern wrote to Cannon: "After thinking about it objectively I do consider it an error that does not coincide with revolutionary ethics. What I can't fathom tho is the principled difference between marriage by a priest and marriage by a cop (magistrate), OKed in the movement. ... We learned under your guidance particularly that when one commits a error he shall self criticize the error and that's what I do in my statement. But S[hachtman] it seems never learned that, and tries only to make a factional

Angelo were on the ground. Clarke encountered difficulties far more serious than what Glotzer rubbed up against in Minneapolis, but Cannon, resuming once more his caretaker role, cautioned Clarke not to overplay his hand. Cannon to Clarke, 23 September 1932, Reel 3, JPC Papers. See also Gordon to Cannon, 24 October 1932; Cannon to Gordon, 5 November 1932, 20 December 1932, Reel 3, JPC Papers. This is not to suggest that there were not youthful problems to address among Cannon's chosen field operatives. Gordon, for instance, came in for considerable criticism for his arrogance. But on the whole, Cannon's patient pedagogical efforts with young operatives was exemplary. See Cannon to Gordon, 20 December 1932; Gordon to Cannon, 29 December 1932; and, for a particular critical letter to Cannon about Gordon's insolence and disdainful behavior when he was being billeted by a League rank-and-filer in Cleveland, see Joseph Keller (?) to Cannon, 29 March 1933, all Reel 3, JPC Papers.

playball of the matter; one more of those Cannonites. But when a comrade or a leader tries to build a faction on such small and petty scandalous issues, he is sure going down to failure and can only lead to petty-bourgeois gossiping." Cannon and Swabeck balked at the demand that Morgenstern be suspended for one year, resulting in allegations that they were running a "protection racket" for their faction members. The Morgenstern affair showed Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer at their worst: spiteful factional cliquists willing to go to any length to pillory Cannon and Swabeck who, by 1933, were being referred to in group correspondence as, respectively "The Master" and "the Danish Baptist." In this worsening, personalized, factional climate, talk of a split in the Communist League of America inevitably emerged, a division that the Left Oppositionists across the country feared and were unable to comprehend politically.⁸²

At issue were much more than hurt feelings, elementary communist morality, and harsh words, of which there were many. The clique factionalism emerging in the CLA would ultimately betray itself in the work of the Left Opposition as it related to international questions of principle. These principles were the foundation on which the Communist League of America was founded. What proved to be at stake in the inner turmoil of the League in 1931–33 was its standing in the International Left Opposition and the possibility of the American League growing and developing in tandem with the small openings that

82 The above two paragraphs draw on Cannon to Oehler, "The Anti-Cannon Bloc," and Cannon to Dunne, "Our Delegate Will Be on the Boat," 1 January 1933, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 101–107, 185–186; Shachtman, "Statement on Uphold our Revolutionary Classics!" 12 March 1932; Shachtman to Trotsky, "A Bad Situation in the American League," 13 March 1932; Shachtman to Spector, "Cannon's Regime is on a Par with Landau's," 3 January 1933; Albert Glotzer, "Report on National Tour," 11 April 1932; Carl Skoglund to the NC, 18 April 1932; Abern to Glotzer, "The 'Master's' Ways," 6 July 1933, all in *Dog Days*, 169, 170–173, 205–207, 216–218, 384–390, 557–564. As early as 1929 Glotzer had written to Shachtman complaining about "The 'old timers' as they love to be called," were "finding it difficult to engage themselves seriously in the work." See Glotzer to Shachtman, 16 March 1929, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers. More on the Morgenstern affair than appears in the above published correspondence and documents can be gleaned from Karsner to Morgenstern, 11 November 1932, 18 December 1932; Morgenstern to Cannon, 27 December 1932; Cannon to Vincent Ray Dunne, 1 January 1932, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Shachtman to H. La Compte, 20 December 1932, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Glotzer to Shachtman, 2 November 1932, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers; CLA, National Committee Minutes, 15 December 1932; 29 December 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers. See as well Sam Gordon's recollections in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 63.

appeared to be evident in the domestic arena of class struggle in 1932–33. Behind it all lay the unfortunate descent of the personal crises of Cannon in the 1929–30 years and their translation into a politics of factionalism in the later dog days of 1931–33. As matters worsened, however, a light appeared at the end of this dark passageway: unprincipled cliquism and a nasty, personalized factionalism was translated into a discernible political differentiation in which issues of substance could be debated and, unlike hardened personal animus, brought to a political resolution. In this, Trotsky and the Secretariat of the International Left Opposition would play an increasingly important and ultimately determinative role, helping to rescue the CLA from a most unproductive and premature implosion.

9 Factional Waystation: June 1932, National Committee Plenum

Over the course of 1931–33 the Communist League of America was stalemated by this factional impasse. Felt most acutely in the upper reaches of the Left Opposition, in the New York resident National Committee [NC], the factionalism nonetheless penetrated into the branches. Locals like Boston, Chicago and Minneapolis were far from untouched. In the resident NC, recorded minutes of the League's leading body reveal a dysfunctional regime, stymied by rote voting, disfigured by personal animosity, and deformed by dealings unworthy of communist Left Oppositionists. The League's acute poverty and ongoing economic precariousness, in this atmosphere of intensifying factionalism, resulted in irregular financial practices. With the national office always robbing Peter to pay Paul, funds were diverted from one area to another as a matter of necessity that invariably produced an *ad hoc* and arbitrarily irresponsible fiscal regime. Petty cash became the sustaining material force for organizers stranded in the field or League workers who, unable to be paid, needed a meal; factionally-fueled moral certainties licensed "money grabs" for legitimate endeavors that were, of course, challenged by those equally convinced that funds should have been earmarked for other expenses. No end of allegations associated with the misuse of CLA finances resulted, with charges of favoritism, financial starving of individuals and initiatives, and the questioning of leaders' wages all tossed about with abandon. It was common for both factions to raise funds within their constituencies to support their particular understanding of what leading members should be doing as part of their Left Opposition work, even to the point of funding League speaking tours by specific leaders or trips to Europe. Rose Karsner spent countless hours haggling with factional opponents and explaining to factional allies just what had happened to this \$200, where that

\$60 was dispensed, how \$5 would be dispatched immediately, and why other monies were not where they should be.⁸³

The driving force behind the deteriorating relations within the leadership of the CLA was undoubtedly the acrimonious rejection of Cannon by a core group composed of Shachtman, Abern, Spector, and Glotzer. These key cadre were either members of the resident New York National Committee or critically-important components of the editorial collective of *The Militant*. In Abern's case, he was centrally involved in the large and impressionable New York branch. The politics of personalized anti-Cannon repudiation took on the trappings of a vendetta. Every move was animated by a determination to remove an ossified old guard and humiliate a leadership regarded not just as expendable, but as a liability. In a January 1933 communication to Spector, Shachtman summed up, in a private language of excoriation, his animosity to Cannon's "regime":

Perorations on principle for the purpose of executing unprincipled games; the arbitrary suppression of minority views (failure to issue an internal bulletin during the discussion; suppression of our lengthy pre-Plenum statement; refusal to send out our concluding word on the post-Plenum discussion; bureaucratic prohibition against attending 'Weisbord's meeting'; failure to provide Saul and Carter with an opportunity to defend their views in the discussion on a national scale, etc., etc.); the artificial exacerbation of disputes and the manufacture of 'differences' where they do not exist ('our fundamental differences on policy with the Boston branch' – a new song from the Cannon repertory); the paralyzing of the New York branch with factional intrigue and disruption, simply because it burns no incense at Cannon's shrine, and the impeding of the work in Toronto for the same good reason; – all this and much more from the voluminous catalogue created by Cannon in the last year alone, will constitute an arraignment against which he will have to draw to the very bottom of the wells of cunning for a reply.

Shachtman insisted that much could be gained by "slough[ing] off the elements who thrive" on a closed "circle existence," exemplified by Cannon himself. To this end, he was organizing branches to vote against a particular National Com-

83 The archive of CLA correspondence, on various sides, confirms constantly this issue of financial irregularities. See *Dog Days*, 58, citing only a sample of such communications. For a representative Karsner communication around financial irregularities and their factionalization, see Karsner to Swabeck, 24 May 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

mittee decision. "If Toronto throws its vote into the balance," Shachtman wrote: "the knife is at their throat."⁸⁴

Cannon managed to avoid as deep a descent into the personalized nastiness characteristic of his antagonistic comrades. Yet he contributed to the impasse by harboring resentments, nurturing grievances, and reaching into the old bag of organizational maneuvers that he carried with him throughout much of his faction fighting in the Workers (Communist) Party. At stake was who held authority in the New York resident National Committee. Both factional groups did what they could to secure themselves majorities by proposing co-optations of comrades who would vote the factional ticket. This proved especially attractive as a means of insuring voting authority because throughout the 1931–33 years, as we will see, both factions sent representatives to Turkey and Europe to meet with Trotsky and to integrate the CLA more effectively into the International Left Opposition, where issues associated with the French, German, and Spanish sections were of growing importance. With key factional leaders absent and unable to cast votes in NC decisions, frustrations mounted as majorities could turn into minorities overnight.

The co-optation tactic was initiated by Shachtman and Abern in 1931, at precisely the point that international issues were becoming contentious and the National Committee of Abern, Cannon, Vincent Ray Dunne, Glotzer, Oehler, Shachtman, Skoglund, Spector, and Swabeck was irrevocably lined-up in a 5–4 majority for Cannon. In the New York resident committee, however, where Cannon's support was anything but secure, the tables could easily be turned depending on who was present and who was not. What should have been a Shachtman-Abern majority in the resident committee was nonetheless highly unstable. Shachtman was sufficiently angered at Cannon's reemergence as a CLA leader that he proposed to absent himself from the New York center, travelling in Europe for two months in the fall of 1931, reporting for *The Militant* on developments in Spain and working with an emerging Left Opposition group in England. When Shachtman-Abern proposed that the NC be expanded and that an ally, New York's Morris Lewit, be added to it, Cannon was vehemently opposed and won the day. Lewit was a deeply committed and able Left Oppositionist and editor of the League's Jewish publication, *Unser Kampf*; his savings as a skilled worker financed Shachtman's 1930 European tour to touch base with Trotsky. For all that Shachtman protested that it was time for the CLA to expand its NC beyond those who served their apprenticeships in communism in Cannon's Workers (Communist) Party faction, it was fairly transparent that

84 Shachtman to Spector, 3 January 1933, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers.

his proposal to bring Lewit on to the Left Opposition's leading body, while justified in many ways, also had clear factional motivations.⁸⁵

As the lineups hardened over the course of the next months, leading into the CLA's June 1932 National Committee Plenum, it was Cannon's turn to advocate co-optation. For a variety of reasons related to his confidence in consolidating his NC majority and winning a generalized Plenum recognition that the League was not rife with political disagreement, Cannon overplayed his hand, proposing three additions to the New York resident body: Louis Basky and Sam Gordon as full members, and George Clarke as an alternate – all Cannon loyalists. Cannon rationalized his position with the statement that such a co-optation was the only way “to reconstitute the resident committee in such a way that its majority reflects the views of the full Committee, the opposite of which is now the case.” With votes on the large National Committee siding with Cannon, the Plenum confirmed these co-optations, against the strident objections of Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer. Because such co-optations were highly irregular, taking place without any evidence of political differences and outside of the appropriate deliberations of a national conference, Cannon proposed submitting the enlargement of the NC to a national referendum of the CLA membership. The Shachtman forces effectively cultivated opposition to the co-optations. They realized that this was “one of the biggest blunders made by Cannon during the Plenum.” They reveled in pointing out that in the case of Gordon, the CLA constitution stipulated that all NC members have a minimum of four years' experience in the communist movement and two years membership in the League. Gordon did not meet the requirements. In the referendum vote, the factional divide within the CLA membership was revealed starkly, just as its apolitical essence surfaced in evident confusions. In a tight vote in which 59 ballots were cast in favor of Cannon's co-optation proposals, 65 negative tallies were also recorded, with 10 abstentions securing the outcome. Cannon's strength was in the proletarian centers of Kansas City, St. Louis, Philadelphia, and Newark, where the votes cast were unanimous in his favor. In Spector-controlled Toronto and in the anti-bureaucratic stronghold of Antoinette Konikow's Boston,⁸⁶ the vote went against Cannon with equal unanim-

85 See the discussion of the Lewit co-optation in *Dog Days*, 29, 49; “Glotzer to Trotsky,” 5 April 1932, 194; Abern, Glotzer, and Shachtman, “The Situation in the American Opposition: Prospect and Retrospect,” 4 June 1932, 257–260; Shachtman Group Circular, “Some Considerations on the National Committee Plenum,” 16 June 1932, 303; Abern, Glotzer, and Shachtman, “Statement of the National Committee (Minority): The Results of the Plenum of the National Committee,” 29 June 1932, 317.

86 Just before the Plenum Konikow's Boston branch spearheaded a protest to Swabeck about

ity. In the large, heterogeneous, but youthful and somewhat dilettantish New York branch 22 votes were cast for Gordon, Basky, and Clarke, but a weighty 35 rejected their National Committee appointments. In Chicago and Minneapolis the vote split, with Glotzer's influence undoubtedly registered in the former, and Carl Cowl's in the latter.⁸⁷

Cannon was somewhat stoic in defeat. To Gordon, displaced from the New York office to field work in Pennsylvania and Ohio, Cannon wrote, caretaker-like: "it does not grieve me to see that the demagoguery which accomplished the defeat of your cooptation to the NC and pushed you out of the center is bringing about a demonstration of your abilities in another field. Many a cat thrown out through the door returns through the window. People would make fewer mistakes in this respect if they would stop to make sure what kind of a cat they are throwing out." Having committed himself to the struggle to right the League, Cannon anticipated stonewalling and worse in the oppositionally-inclined, Shachtman-controlled resident New York committee. It had more than shown its willingness to undermine the larger National Committee. With Swabeck about to depart for Europe and consultations with Trotsky, Cannon went to work full time for the League again, resuming his original post as National Secretary. It was, he recognized, not the best of times to be relying on the wages of

changes in CLA trade union policy in the needle trades, liquidating the industrial union that some Boston League members belonged to and supported. This correspondence springboarded over the summer into support for the Shachtman, Abern, Glotzer factional statement, "The Situation in the American Opposition: Prospect and Retrospect," 4 June 1932, *Dog Days*, 230–281, placing its accent on criticism of bureaucratization in the CLA. See Jennie Chipman (?) to Swabeck, 20 April 1932; Swabeck to Konikow, 20 April 1932; Konikow to Zwabeck, 25 April 1932; Swabeck to Boston Branch, no date [August 1932]; Konikow to National Executive Committee, 21 September 1932; Konikow to My Dear Comrade Zwabeck, 22 September 1932; 23 September 1932; Swabeck to Konikow, 28 September 1932, all in Reel 20, JPC Papers. See also Sam Gordon in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 63–66.

- 87 For discussion of co-optation see CLA, Minutes of the National Committee Plenum, 10–13 June 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers. For referendum details see CLA, National Committee Minutes, 23 November 1932, Box 35, File 6, GB Papers. Abern and Shachtman, "Results of the Postplenum Discussion," 3 January 1933, *Dog Days*, 371–384 and Shachtman to Comrades, 26 November 1932, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers, disputed the referendum figures, claiming voting irregularities, but the outcome was the same and the changed count of little consequence. For the Shachtman Group's assessment of the co-optation as a Cannon error see "Some Considerations on the Results of the National Committee Plenum," 16 June 1932, in *Dog Days*, 303. The issue of co-optations is dealt with in CLA, *Internal Bulletin*, Number 5, "Results of the Discussion and Voting on the Plenum Resolution," 29 December 1932, while Spector clearly complained of a number of procedural issues: see Cannon to Spector, 17 February 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

a professional revolutionary, especially when the organization of employment was the Communist League of America. "*The Militant* is on the rocks, we are in the worst financial straits we have been in for a long time, the work is disorganized by the worst kind of an internal fight, and most of our members are out of work and unable to contribute. But in spite of that, or rather just because of that, I have come to the conclusion, after careful deliberation, that it has to be done in order to accelerate the solution of the crisis and point the league toward its really great tasks and opportunities." Cannon's decision to assume the post of National Secretary came at a time when his enlarged New York resident NC was about to be reduced and thus potentially rendered ineffective by the membership vote against co-optation. This was described by Abern and Shachtman as "the merited reprimand" of the Cannon Group by the League, and further criticisms surfaced when this faction failed to distribute post-Plenum documents.

Shachtman and Abern rejected Cannon as National Secretary, proposing instead that Abern and Cannon share the work on a voluntary basis. They corresponded with comrades, painting Cannon's motives in the worst possible light, suggesting that he was merely trying to secure a paid position. Shachtman caricatured what he labeled "a low advertising campaign ... to put Cannon into the office of secretary," a post to which he was said to be congenitally unsuited. Cannon's earlier withdrawal was, yet again, hauled before the resident New York National Committee but, fortunately for Cannon, it was not, as it could have been, securely in the Shachtman-Abern camp. The referendum aside, the resident New York National Committee members were, by January 1933, realigned in a majority for Cannon, a consequence of Glotzer removing himself from New York to Chicago for employment reasons and Oehler relocating from Chicago to New York. Glotzer wrote to Shachtman in mid-January 1932. "The news about Cannon's secretaryship is not amusing," he complained, suggesting that there would be one of two outcomes: "the usual bellowing in the form of national circular letters, or the complete absence of letters." He added gratuitously, "At that, I am not sure which is preferable: Swabeck's disguised mutterings or Cannon's direct abuse."

Oehler and Swabeck carried the day, defending Cannon as a legitimate candidate for the post of National Secretary, but also endorsing strongly the important principle of the necessity of paying revolutionary functionaries. In the campaign against Cannon as National Secretary, Shachtman and Abern stood condemned by Oehler and Swabeck for their "nauseating calumny" and "foul agitation." They were further castigated for attempting to "freeze the organization into [a] narrow mold," in which the "preoccupation with purely literary propaganda" was continued and other fronts ignored. To the extent that the anti-Cannon arguments turned on finances, as Shachtman and Abern

allowed them to, Oehler and Swabeck responded that this was nothing more than “incitement on the ‘money question’ to the ignorant, the backward and demoralized elements who are infected with syndicalistic prejudices against the payment of functionaries.”

Cannon wrote to Carl Skoglund in January 1933, enthusiastic about the prospects for the Left Opposition “breaking out of the narrow groove in which it has been confined so long,” but obviously angered by the obstructionism of the Shachtman-Abern-Carter combination. “If you have a stomach for ironic jests,” he wrote Skoggy, “consider this one: Up till now there has always been a motion on the books that the national secretary shall receive wages. It is true he did not get them, but at any rate there was a genuine promise to that effect, and by that the declaration of intentions. But when Cannon comes into the office he is confronted with a specific motion that he shall not even have the promise of any means to maintain his family, and more than that there is a campaign in the ranks against it.”

In a strong-arm attempt to insure that the resident New York National Committee be a functioning unit able to carry on the work of the CLA, rather than be deadlocked in 2–2 votes, Cannon moved to constitute a Political Committee of three that would function in Swabeck’s absence, to be composed of Oehler, Cannon, and Shachtman. Given Cannon’s majority on the dispersed National Committee, this proposal carried, depriving Abern of his vote on the resident NC. This undemocratic gerrymander would later draw Trotsky’s stern rebuke: “It appears to me absolutely impermissible to deprive comrade Abern of his vote ...,” adding in a conversation with Swabeck that, “these organizational methods on [your] part are ... carried over from the time of Stalinism ... [they] would be unheard of in Lenin’s time.”⁸⁸

88 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon to Gordon, 20 December 1932, Reel 3, JPC Papers; *Dog Days*, 57 and Trotsky to Swabeck, 7 March 1933, “The Majority Has No Right to Impatience,” 473; Swabeck to Cannon, 8 March 1933, “Trotsky Expects More of Us,” 482; Shachtman to Konikow, 6 January 1933, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers; CLA, National Committee Minutes, 5 January 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers; Cannon to Skoglund, “Breaking out of the Narrow Groove,” 24 January 1933, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon, Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 197–199. On the turmoil immediately preceding and flowing out of Cannon’s decision to take up the position of the CLA’s National Secretary in January 1933 see Spector to Shachtman, 29 December 1932, “Cannon Overreaches Himself”; Shachtman to Spector, 3 January 1933, “Cannon’s Regime is on a par with Landau’s”; Shachtman to Glotzer, 8 January 1933, “Cannon’s Suave Calumny”; Abern and Shachtman, 9 January 1933, “Against Cannon as National Secretary”; Swabeck and Oehler, 10 January 1932, “For Cannon as National Secretary”; Cannon, “On Assuming the Post of National Secretary,” 10 January 1933; Abern and Shachtman, “No Financial Sabotage,” 23 January 1933, all in *Dog Days*, 367–411; “Motions by Abern and Shachtman,” [1933] and Glotzer to Shachtman,

The June 1932 National Committee Plenum was called to specifically address the intensifying and little understood factionalism that irrevocably divided the CLA's resident New York leadership and that threatened the day-to-day political workings of the League. Unity was the rallying cry, and the results of the Plenum did indeed allow the impression to be created in the ranks of the CLA that this had been achieved. As we will see, there was a critically important move on the part of Shachtman and Spector, at least, to backtrack, if not quite concede error, on pivotally important international questions. The significance of this was papered over and few of the die-hards in the anti-Cannon faction actually grasped the political importance of crucial issues, preferring to hold firmly to their personal antagonisms. Steps were taken towards unity, to be sure, but it is difficult to survey the documents generated by the Plenum and read them in the context of relationships in the League immediately subsequent to this national gathering and not conclude that the CLA remained mired in the factionalism of the dog days.

On the one side, Cannon, Swabeck, and their supporters were repulsed by what they considered the bloc cliquism of their opponents, in which the animating resentments and grievances seemed, first and foremost, to be *personalized* hostility, rather than arising from fundamental *political* disagreements over matters of principle.⁸⁹ Cannon rightly insisted that leaders did indeed need to be judged within the communist movement. He was adamant, however, that such appraisal must flow out of an assessment of "the whole of their political activity which is unfolded before the eyes of the entire membership, and not on the basis of prejudice, gossip, unsupported petty accusations and recriminations, 'grievances,' etc." He had become both fatigued and impatient with the "purely personal allegations, relating to events of three years ago," that colored so gaudily the presentation of much of Shachtman and Company's dissatisfactions with the "degenerating old guard" and the rightward-leaning bureaucratic centralism attributed to Cannon's leadership. Thus Cannon welcomed the opportunity that the June 1932 National Committee Plenum posed to "probe to the bottom" the conflicts evident within the League. "We must go

16 January 1932, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers. On the Abern gerrymander see Cannon to Skoglund and Dunne, 2 February 1933 (dictated 24 January 1933); and for Spector's obvious protests around this and other procedural issues see Cannon to Spector, 17 February 1933; both in Reel 3, JPC Papers. Note as well Shachtman to Trotsky, 13 January 1933, Roll 3, Reel 3346, MS Papers.

89 Cannon's rough notes for speeches delivered at the Plenum are perhaps the best summary of his positions. See Cannon, "Outline: First Plenum Speech, 11 June 1932"; "Plenum Speech: 13 June 1932"; "The Leading Cadre and Its Traditions, 1932"; "Internal Speech, 1932," all in Reel 33, JPC Papers.

deep and find out what it really means," he wrote to Bernie Morgenstern in May 1932, "We must insist that the *causes* be laid bare and the necessary correctives firmly determined." Frustrated by the extent to which the New York resident National Committee, which was controlled in the spring of 1932 by a 3–2 Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer majority, essentially hijacked the larger NC, Cannon was also increasingly troubled by the ways in which a youthful New York branch was encouraged in its anti-Cannonism.

A *de facto* opposition to the duly constituted National Committee seemed to have emerged. Indeed, the New York local would eventually institutionalize its opposition to the National Committee, systematically reducing NC supporters on the branch Executive to a mere two of eleven members. Swabeck and Cannon proposed a radical means of addressing the disputed issues. They moved that the CLA establish an *Internal Bulletin*, through which a series of documents relating to the New York branch, Carter's complaints about Swabeck's response to his article on Engels, and Shachtman's views on the matter, as well as a Cannon-Swabeck authored statement on internal problems in the League, be submitted to the membership. The understanding was that the contentious issues would be discussed at a National Conference. With the proposal defeated by the Shachtman majority on the resident New York NC, both sides agreed that neither would press for a national conference in the near future, although this was Cannon's preference. A June 1932 National Committee Plenum was the compromise solution; the entire CLA leadership would decide where the political chips should fall.⁹⁰

Shachtman reacted to the April 1932 Cannon-Swabeck proposals to circulate documents and discuss contentious matters through the distribution of *Internal Bulletins* with a rejoinder that bordered on the irrational in its attribution of divisive motivations. "The aim of the Cannon-Swabeck statement, tacitly avowed at the resident committee meeting, is to split the League, as rapidly and as physically as possible, and at that on a basis devoid of genuine principles or true facts," he argued unequivocally. The Shachtman forces on the resident New York NC then pushed for a Plenum, their purpose being

90 In the above two paragraphs quotes from Cannon, "Draft on the Internal Struggle," July 1932 and Cannon to Morgenstern, 7 May 1932, published as "The Fight Is Here," both published in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writing and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 140, 113. Other relevant documents in this collection include Cannon to Dunne, 10 April 1932, published as "Lay the Whole Matter Before the Membership," 80–82; Cannon to Dunne, 21 April 1932, published as "The 'Degeneration of the Old Guard,'" 83–91; Cannon to Oehler, 30 April 1932, published as "The Anti-Cannon Bloc," 101–107. Note also the Cannon-Swabeck proposals in CLA, National Committee Minutes, 4 April 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers.

to “record for the first time the manner in which the *real* disputes have been developing in the National Committee for the past three years and to state our position on them formally.” The result was the extensive report provided by Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer, “The Situation in the American Opposition: Prospect and Retrospect,” submitted to the Plenum less than a week before it convened. “Prospect and Retrospect” was a relentlessly personalized attack on Cannon, composed of three distinct strands. First, it was a compilation of Cannon’s political sins in the period of his 1929–30 withdrawal. Second, it provided a heated rejoinder to Cannon’s understanding of the American Left Opposition being prepared for its place under the banner of Trotskyism through years of development within the Stalinizing Workers (Communist) Party, the so-called “gestation theory.” And third, and finally, the document was a detailed repudiation of Cannon’s course after his political revival in 1931. Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer condemned Cannon for *not* doing the work the League expected of him, just as it attacked him for, subsequently, taking on his leadership responsibilities. Swabeck, who contributed to this Cannon revival, and provided the League with much-needed stability, was similarly assailed, his role reduced, in the later words of Abern, to an “old pliant faction agent of Cannon.” Cannon was, if Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer were to be taken at their “Prospect and Retrospect” word, interested only in his historic entitlement as *the* leader. He betrayed himself in his “baseless” attacks on the New York branch where “a great number of the most active New York militants do not show the ‘proper respect’ for Cannon and Swabeck.” Totally out of touch with the youth, Cannon and Swabeck were pilloried for dismissing “all the younger comrades who do not fall in line with their views” as “young upstarts.” In the critical response to the controversial Carter article on Engels, Cannon was dismissed as an opponent unworthy of consideration: “We shall not venture here to argue questions of Marxism and dialectics with comrade Cannon, whose mastery in these fields is fairly well-known.” Having said this, Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer then made mention of “Cannon’s belabored sarcasm.” And so it went. “Prospect and Retrospect” worked towards a conclusion with a statement that, in many ways, summarized its substantive complaint to the National Committee, which its authors desired would have a wider circulation within the CLA. “Cannon aims at ridding himself of embarrassing criticism and critics, primarily of the undersigned and those who may in any way share their views in the organization as a whole.”⁹¹

91 Shachtman, “On the Motion for a Plenary Session of the NC,” 4 April 1932; Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer, “The Situation in the American Opposition: Prospect and Retrospect,” 4 June 1932; Abern to Glotzer, 6 July 1933, published as “The Master’s Ways,” all in *Dog Days*,

“Prospect and Retrospect” was a curiously contradictory document, at least in terms of what it was supposed to accomplish. Penned as the Plenum plumped for political unity, it was nevertheless a divisive reiteration of stubborn, personalized factionalism. Authored by those who championed theoretical clarity and ardent internationalism, it argued its case almost against these clarion calls, relying instead on recourse to anecdote, gossip, and parochialism. The bulk of the document is a blow-by-blow accounting of Cannon’s many misdeeds, and when it ventures on to international ground it does so in like manner. Cannon’s knowledge of the international scene is castigated as “casual, formal, and superficial,” his interest in it a mere pretense “required in the pursuit of factional aims.” Relying on CLA National Committee minutes to establish that the League had an inadequate appreciation of the complexities of developments in the European Left Oppositions, Shachtman, Glotzer, and Abern accepted no responsibility for this state of affairs. Yet, two of them had been the only CLA members to travel to Turkey and Europe to converse with Trotsky and other leading figures. Shachtman was the American representative on the International Bureau. Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer also skirted important issues raised by Trotsky with them and the CLA and, again, reduced the entire political issue of international relations in the United States Opposition to its lowest common denominator: Cannon’s vindictiveness and hypocrisy prompted him to search for international differences the better to skewer his opponents. If “Prospect and Retrospect” was indeed meant to be a counter to the Cannon-Swabeck Plenum statement, “Internal Problems in the CLA,” which had been circulating since March 1932, it failed to take the level of discussion on international questions into the very arenas that this earlier document targeted. Little was said about the position of the League, drawing on the experience of the International Left Opposition, on how best to consolidate revolutionary cadres when faced with tendencies working against this end from inside various national sections; and the necessity of drawing conclusions from and elaborating lessons on the recent history of the ILO in this regard.⁹²

184–185, 230–281, 557–564; Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer, “Some Considerations on the Results of the National Committee Plenum,” 16 June 1932, appended to CLA, Minutes of the National Committee Plenum, 10–13 June 1932, Box 35, File 6, GB Papers, also published in *Dog Days*, 282–298.

92 Contrast Cannon and Swabeck, “Internal Problems of the CLA,” 22 March 1932, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 42–73, and Shachtman, Abern, Glotzer, “The Situation in the American Opposition: Prospect and Retrospect,” 4 June 1932, in *Dog Days*, 230–281. Cannon’s unfinished rejoinder to “Prospect and Retrospect” accents the international questions as primary and appears as “Draft on the Internal Struggle,” July 1932, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches*,

On the one hand, then, the June 1932 Plenum managed to piece together unity agreements between the opposing factions on the substantive resident New York NC issues of ostensible disagreement that had precipitated the need for a Plenum in the first place. Shachtman, for instance, submitted a statement on the Carter Group in the New York branch that, while it did not entirely satisfy Cannon and Swabeck, nevertheless provided what they were willing to acknowledge as “a basis for unanimity.” A longstanding split in the Toronto local of the CLA, ironically not unlike that which had simmered in New York as Carter brought the anti-leadership forces to boil, was resolved with Cannon and Swabeck supporting “fully the political tendency represented by comrade Spector and considers it as the basis for united collaboration.” On the other hand, however, “Prospect and Retrospect,” buried discussion of what was destined to be the most hotly contested international questions affecting the CLA’s relation to the various Left Opposition movements. It did this in two ways: 1) by lodging the section on international issues well toward the end of the document, in effect obscuring it; 2) posing the key question of political differentiation going on within the ILO in a largely apolitical way.

The Shachtman, Abern, Glotzer document collapsed the meaning of Left Opposition European disputes within the CLA to minuted resolutions shorn of any substantive attempt to situate, retrospectively, what was at stake in a series of developments that articulated how divergent the politics of certain camps were from basic Leninist principles. Cannon and Swabeck quite rightly saw the statement as not only foreign to the unity undertakings of the June 1932 Plenum, but an undermining of the *movement* towards unity that had been initiated. They insisted that if “Prospect and Retrospect” was to remain in the record, it would have to be responded to by Cannon, who was prepared to answer charges and allegations against him.⁹³ In turn, he expected the Plenum to take a position on the resulting opposing documents and argued that they should go to the membership as well. Short of this, Swabeck and Cannon insisted that the document should not be circulated, and had a motion passed in the resident New York National Committee to this effect. Confronted

1932–1934, 138–156. On Shachtman’s role in the ILO’s International Bureau see Trotsky to Shachtman, 17 November 1930, “Shachtman to be Part of International Bureau,” in *Dog Days*, 89–91; Shachtman to Administrative Secretariat, 7 February 1931, Roll 9, Reel 3352, MS Papers; Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 50.

93 This response was never completed but see what I take to be Cannon’s rough notes for such a rejoinder in the mislabeled, untitled, handwritten document headed “Mass Work,” and designated “[1932–1933: re Weisbord?],” Reel 33, JPC Papers. Also note Cannon, “Draft on the Internal Struggle,” July 1932, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 138–156.

with all of this, Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer took "Prospect and Retrospect" out of the Plenum proceedings. They would nonetheless insist that "in withdrawing it from the formal archive, we re-asserted our formal agreement with every word in it." The Shachtman forces were insistent: "We have yielded nothing on our views."⁹⁴

In the end, the June 1932 Plenum established a façade of unity on a number of questions. Rank-and-file and youth members were perplexed. Chicago youth leader, Nathan Gould, for instance, had read both "the Shachtman document" ("Prospect and Retrospect") and a rejoinder by Cannon supporter, Hugo Oehler. He considered the former "a mass of confusion and political sophistry," but he was not without his objections to the positions put forward by the Cannon Group. Most importantly, Gould wondered how it was that the "L.O. is thrown into the zone of a split ... because we are trying to find a solution to an unprincipled fight based, from the point of view of the minority, upon Cannon's inactivity, and from the point of view of the majority, upon Swabek's correctness in issuing a condemnation of Carter's article without first going to the N.C. There is something radically wrong here." As Gould and others saw it, "Upon all fundamental political questions, save for the International question, there was complete unanimity in the Central Committee. Therefore there is no basis for a split."⁹⁵

Most important, then, were the very international questions that Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer relegated to the margins and that Cannon insisted were of paramount significance. The seeming convergence of views on the international front was probably more substantive than were the less well founded postures of unity around other matters, most of which were inconsequential. The *political* issues at stake in the area of international issues were far more substantive. This was confirmed in a Spector-authored "Resolution on the International Question" that committed the CLA to the positions of Trotsky and the Left Opposition with respect to a range of controversial struggles inside European sections that had resulted in splits and purges in Germany, Spain, and France. Spector's document, which provided a clear and unambiguous reiteration of Trotsky's perspective, provided to all national sections in a

94 "Minutes of the Plenum: CLA National Committee, 10–13 June 1932," and Shachtman Group, "Some Considerations on the Results of the National Committee Plenum," 16 June 1932, in *Dog Days*, 282–304; CLA, National Committee Minutes, 30 June 1932, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers.

95 The outcome of the June 1932 Plenum was distributed to the members through CLA, *Internal Bulletin No. 1* [June 1932]. Quoting Gould to Oehler, 25 October 1932, Reel 20, JPC Papers.

December 1931 communication, replaced different drafts originally prepared, in one case, by Abern, and in another by Glotzer. Shachtman, held responsible for muddying the waters with respect to his important role as a conduit through which the CLA received its information and formed its perspective on international developments, was asked to affirm that he had been responsible for the League's misunderstandings on questions related to the ILO because of positions that he had formerly held and had now changed. This Shachtman refused to do, arguing instead that while he had indeed espoused, on the basis of "casual, episodic opinion," incorrect considerations, it was now imperative that the CLA overcome its laxity and delay in addressing international matters. Little of this kind of advance would be registered as long as "the problems of the international, particularly the European Opposition, become a factional football in the League." Nonetheless, Shachtman, Abern, Glotzer, and Spector appreciated that their weakest link was indeed on the international front, which they also grasped would be fundamental in the future: "The greatest weakness of our position was our failure to act collectively for the whole period prior to the Plenum. While all our leading comrades had a fundamentally similar position on the international questions, this was not reflected in their conduct. Shachtman's failure to establish his position clearly to the Committee on this point when it first rose there, and later the separate resolutions of Abern and Glotzer, did great harm to our stand. ... [enabling] Cannon and Swabeck to utilize it to more than the maximum in distorting the dispute. Without overcoming this difficulty we shall not advance very far in the future."⁹⁶

There were abundant indications, then, that the personalized clique factionalism predominating throughout American Trotskyism's dog days from 1929–32 was about to move on to new terrain. Among the signs of this shift were: Spector's unity resolution; Shachtman's suggestion that international questions were mishandled in the past and were now a potential "factional football"; the odd alignment of Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer in their agreement on the retrospective assessment of the CLA and Cannon's crimes but their apparent inability to provide a common front on the politics of European developments; and Cannon's insistence, in June – July 1932, that the international questions were the decisive test of the politics of faction in the American League. As fac-

96 Spector considered the various resolutions on the ILO inadequate upon a first reading. See Spector to Shachtman, 29 March 1932, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers. Note also "Minutes of the Plenum: CLA National Committee, 10–13 June 1932," and Shachtman Group, "Some Considerations on the Results of the National Committee Plenum," 16 June 1932, in *Dog Days*, 282–305.

tionalism became internationalized in 1932–33, the problems of what Cannon called “unprincipled clique politics” transcended their origins. Factionalism associated with political differentiation was, for the first time, able to be decisively situated in something other than the grievances of gut animosities. It thus required an infusion of *political issues* of an essentially international kind to take the factionalism in the CLA beyond, in the words of Gould, one group “calling Cannon a Lazy-Moody Irishman,” and the other labeling Shachtman “a Supercilious-literary Jew who is impressed more by the literary value of a document than the political contents.”⁹⁷

For his part, Cannon utilized the June 1932 National Committee Plenum to reestablish before the ranks of the American Left Opposition his capacity to draw the revolutionary ranks together on the basis of principled political positions, preeminent among them consistent stands on international questions. Detailed speech notes of five 1932 addresses to the CLA membership reveal Cannon at his best. Insisting that the League faced a crisis of leadership that threatened to develop into a full-blown organizational implosion, Cannon was adamant that there was more at stake in the CLA’s factional impasse than personal quarrels. The League’s leadership crisis took a new, intensified turn towards “more concrete, more decisive, and more significant” divisions, revealing “a connection with the international crisis of the Left Opposition.” This threatened to pass from “the apparently incidental, episodic, and personal conflicts between individuals into the *division into groups* on a profound political basis.” Conciliation was thus impossible. Hammering away at the irresponsible precipitation of division and factional intrigue within a Shachtman camp that had “dragged the League into the fight with hysterical cries about a ‘split,’” when there were so few internal political issues of dispute, Cannon refused to bow before those who would rehash old, personal battles that turned on accusations of the “Cannon group’s conservatism.” He pointed the finger accusingly at “triflers and speculators of the Carter type,” for whom he implied gossip mongering was a priority. Instead, he insisted on focusing attention on Shachtman’s international record with respect to his relations with contentious ILO figures such as Pierre Naville and others, a subject of Trotsky’s “annihilating analysis.” Defiant in his rejection that he was somehow incapable of commenting on or coming to conclusions with respect to international matters, Cannon pointed out that Shachtman was “not the first to try this game. ... The Stalinists took it up. Such abominable methods will never be imposed on the Opposition.” Glotzer’s failure to stand consistent principled ground on the international

97 Gould to Oehler, 25 October 1932, Reel 20, JPC Papers.

issues drew Cannon's particular ire, as did Shachtman's inability to explain his positions and how they had been misunderstood by Trotsky and others.

In the end, Cannon struck blows for a Party in which the internal fights that inevitably erupt would have behind them political reasons, not the factional intrigues of cliques and personal combinations. He explained the factional imbroglio of 1930–32 as a consequence of the inevitable confines of the Left Opposition: it had, in its earliest formation, been limited to a “struggle on a narrow propaganda basis” and this drew “toward us a considerable number who only studied texts.” Such recruits, drawn to the ranks of the Communist League of America (Opposition) out of “admiration for Trotsky’s literary style” gave branches like the New York local the political tone of “a High School debating society.” “The basic principles of Communism and communist organization,” in Cannon’s view, were too often sadly lacking, and whether these could be instilled in those drawn to the CLA “depends on the leadership.” Against unprincipled factionalism, dilettantes, and triflers with proletarian discipline, Cannon proposed that a new spirit must animate the League, one guided by “work in the class struggle.” Stressing interventions in unions, mass organizations, and among the miners of the mid-west where the CLA had longstanding connections, Cannon called for the Left Opposition to adopt a new spirit of training and educating its youth. If Cannon did not win over all comrades to all of his positions, he nonetheless played a decisive role in what he referred to as “safeguard[ing] the political and consequently the organization[al] unity of the League.” According to Cannon’s post-Plenum reflections, “In the period preceding the Plenum – and during it – we witnessed the attempt to sidetrack the actual issues of dispute in favor of secondary, outlived, and personal questions. The inconsequential nature of these issues was demonstrated by the fact that the minority did not submit any of them for decision. They withdrew the document containing this rubbish.” Against post-Plenum attempts on the part of Shachtman and others to revive factional issues, Cannon concluded that the membership must continue to be informed, to know all the facts, and to discuss them thoroughly. “We got unity by fighting for it,” Cannon concluded, and the CLA and its leadership would only be preserved by continuing in the same manner.⁹⁸

The unity National Committee Plenum of June 1932 was thus something of a CLA waystation. Called to decisively end the factional impasse of the Left

98 Cannon’s speech notes include: “Outline. First Plenum Speech, 6/11/1932”; “Plenum Speech, 13 June 1932”; “Reply to Discussion, 1932”; “The Leading Cadre and Its Traditions, 1932”; “Internal Speech, 1932” all in “Speeches and Writings, 1932–1933,” Box 27/Reel 33, JPC Papers.

Opposition's dog days, it asserted a pressured and obviously fragile unity at the same time as it exposed the ongoing personal differences that remained the wavering foundation of factionalism. Yet this June 1932 Plenum, in raising international issues to a new place of prominence, suggested the extent to which political differentiation was indeed associated with the clique factionalism of 1929–32. When this primacy of the political came to be understood more clearly by all involved, the possibility of transcending the personalized impasse of CLA factionalism finally presented itself.⁹⁹

10 Factionalism Internationalized: The Turn to Europe

On 20 December 1932 Cannon wrote to Vincent Ray Dunne. His letter, penned in the aftermath of the vote against co-optation and the consequent backdrop of uncertainty as to how the resident New York National Committee would be functioning, recognized that international questions were now of decisive importance within the CLA. "We think it time now to let the old man know what is going on here so that he won't be surprised when we begin to deal a few real wallops, and so that he can contribute his advice at the opportune moment." In addition, Cannon understood that, "Big developments are also going on in the European sections concerning which we need first hand information in order to profit by experiences there." Heretofore, Trotsky formed his "impressions of the American movement from Shachtman, Glotzer, Weisbord ... and a special delegate of New York intellectuals who are sympathetic to Trotskyism but disinclined to work up a perspiration about it." Cannon asked coyly, "Do you think it would be amiss if we should send someone over now to chip in a word or two about the American labor and communist movements and the perspectives and tasks as we see them?"¹⁰⁰

It had taken Cannon a long time to get to this point of pushing forcefully within the nascent international Left Opposition forces for a more collaborative relationship of the American section to its European counterparts. An original convert to such close relations during the first years of the Communist International, Cannon was badly disillusioned with the politically deformed and arbitrarily one-sided Stalinist domination that turned the Workers (Communist) Party into a pale, distorted reflection of Bolshevism in the later 1920s.

99 CLA, *Internal Bulletin*, Number 1 [no date]; Number 2 (July 1932); Number 3 (July 1932), summarize the political issues that received a hearing at the June 1932 National Committee Plenum.

100 Cannon to Vincent Ray Dunne, 20 December 1932, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

As noted earlier in this chapter, Cannon's understandable skepticism and reluctance to rely on distant international authority was reinforced by his demoralizing personal difficulties and partial withdrawal from Left Opposition responsibilities in the 1929–30 years. But over the course of the growth of clique factionalism within the CLA, especially during his political revival in 1931–32, Cannon came to see Trotsky, however wary were his raw instincts, in an entirely different light. Educating Cannon and renewing his healthy appetite for the fundamental internationalism of the Left Opposition was nothing less than Trotsky's balanced handling of questions and controversies that, ironically, shed light on the League's factional impasse.

It was perhaps understandable that Cannon's reticence to turn for guidance to Trotsky in the beginnings of the American Left Opposition was countered by Shachtman's and Glotzer's reaching across the Atlantic to Trotsky. He reinforced their sense of themselves as rising and theoretically sophisticated advocates of internationalism.¹⁰¹ Cannon had been 'the old man' of Shachtman's, Glotzer's, and Abern's faction throughout the late 1920s, and the undeniable figure of influence in their break from Stalinism and the Workers (Communist) Party. They were now in the process of distancing themselves from Cannon, separating from him personally and cultivating a sense of their own superior theoretical capacities and more richly-developed internationalism. Trotsky was a new, and quite larger-than-life, 'Old Man', one in whom was legitimately invested not only the *experience* of revolutionary struggle, but the *conceptual acumen* of theory and internationalist dialogue.¹⁰²

101 "I need hardly dwell, when writing to you, upon the shallowness of his internationalism," Shachtman closed one paragraph of communication with Spector, referring to Cannon. Shachtman to Spector, 27 November 1932, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers.

102 See, for instance, Shachtman's contrast – obvious but somewhat unfair – of Trotsky and Cannon in "25 Years of American Trotskyism: The Origins of American Trotskyism," *New International*, 20 (January – February 1954), esp. 20–22, which contains much exaggeration and statements that were untrue. For example, the claim that "Cannon never showed more than the most nominal interest in the tremendous work done in this country, by myself in particular, to select, translate, edit, and publish the theoretical, polemica, and political works of Trotsky," is, as the discussion of Cannon's important role in the Left Opposition/CLA publication program in the last chapter indicated, wildly wrong. Cannon actually did a great deal to raise the money for the publication of important works, writing introductions to some of them as well. Thus Cannon, through contact with A.A. 'Shorty' Buehler, secured the necessary funds to publish the Shachtman-translated Leon Trotsky, *Communism and Syndicalism: On The Trade Union Question* (New York: Communist League of America, 1931), which acknowledged "the financial contributions collected from members and sympathizers of the Kansas City branch of the Communist League of America (Opposition) by comrade A.A. ('Shorty') Buehler, and to the donation of our

The Communist League of America's first direct contact with Trotsky came in February 1930. Shachtman made the trip to the island of Prinkipo, approximately 20 miles distance from Istanbul, Turkey, where Trotsky was living in exile. The purpose of the visit, as we have seen, was to discuss with Trotsky the dire necessity of financial support for *The Militant*. It was sanctioned by an 11 February 1930 Chicago meeting of CLA National Committee members Skoglund, Glotzer, Swabeck, and Shachtman, with the endorsement of Spector and Abern. The convening of the Committee was facilitated by Shachtman's presence in the Windy City to attend the funeral of the grandmother of his wife, Billie Ramloff. Cannon, at this point, had not worked himself out of his personal difficulties and, as we have seen, he was the sole voice of opposition to expanding *The Militant's* schedule of publication. This was resented deeply by Shachtman and Abern, and all other National Committee members, whatever their sympathies for Cannon, were deeply troubled. All no doubt appreciated the importance of *The Militant* and the related ambitious publication program of Trotsky's writings, all of which had necessitated the purchase of linotype equipment that taxed the slender resources of the CLA to the break point. For months the League was committed to raise \$2000 to bankroll its press and pamphlet/book publications, pushing to turn the bi-monthly *Militant* into a weekly, a step taken in November 1929. But optimism of the political will clearly overshot the pessimism of the materially-conscious intellect in 1929–30, for while *The Militant* campaign fund never realized its fiscal ambitions, the press was launched as a weekly even though there were clear indications that the League was having difficulty putting out two issues a month. For all of his doubts and demoralization, Cannon wrote to Trotsky on 1 April 1929, sending him fraternal greetings from the American Left Opposition, and informing him of the advances that had been made in the United States, adding that, "international collaboration and coordination of work is now one of the most pressing needs of the Oppositionists in all countries." Shachtman was thus probably expected, in his February 1930 trip to Turkey, to engage in this kind of international collaboration as well, but his main task was understood to be fund-raising for *The Militant*.¹⁰³

comrade Max Fischer of New York." See Cannon to Buehler, 13 January 1932, "Financing Communism and Syndicalism," in Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1929–1931*, 313–314; Buehler to Cannon, 6 February 1931, Box 3, Folder 3, JPC Papers.

103 *Dog Days*, 44–46; Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 48, 55; Cannon to Trotsky, 1 April 1929, "Greetings to Leon Trotsky in Turkey," in Stanton, *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1929–1931*, 148; Swabeck to Cannon, 8 March 1930; Swabeck to Cannon, 8 April

Shachtman largely came up empty in his appeals to Trotsky. He communicated with Abern, it being apparent as early as late March 1930 that Trotsky simply could not help *The Militant* with any ready funds: too many commitments in Europe made it impossible for Trotsky to sustain the CLA press. As Shachtman reported: "That leaves us, to put it brutally, out." Back in New York on 26 April he wrote to Swabeck, Spector, and Vincent Ray Dunne: "I regret that ... I have not returned with any ready cash to alleviate the situation [with *The Militant*]." Trotsky did commit future royalties to the CLA, earmarking 20 percent of anything Shachtman could secure from a US publisher for a Yiddish edition of his autobiography, *My Life*. In addition, the CLA was ceded various publication rights to some of Trotsky's writings, including the American and British editions of *Permanent Revolution* and United States reproduction rights for *The History of the Russian Revolution*. But all of this was less than a sure thing, and of no consolation in terms of the immediacy of the League's financial needs. It was on the international front that Shachtman considered the trip of "incalculable value." In his discussions with Trotsky and, later, Left Opposition comrades at conferences in Germany and Paris, Shachtman suggested that great gains had been registered. Finally, Shachtman insisted that "the Old Man considers the establishment of a real center imperative," and thus used his trip to leverage the relocation of Spector and Swabeck to New York, an initiative that he no doubt considered would further marginalize Cannon.¹⁰⁴

Shachtman fully expected recrimination and blame for his failures to come back to the United States with the problems of *The Militant* solved. He justified his trip, however, on the basis of the gains he consolidated in the sphere of international relations. Indeed, Shachtman stayed longer in Prinkipo than had been authorized, and perhaps engaged in far more international work than Cannon and others had imagined him undertaking. Shachtman overstayed because he was learning from and enjoying his time with Trotsky, who also benefited from and liked discussing the state of the League and its American prospects with Shachtman. This situation allowed Shachtman a certain entre into the nascent international relations of the Left Opposition, where organization was at a minimum and much was open for influence. In this context Shachtman came to achieve a certain intimacy with Trotsky, cultivating his

1930, Box 3, Folder 3, JPC Papers; Spector to Shachtman, 3 February 1930; Shachtman to Spector, 8 February 1930, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers.

104 Shachtman to Abern, 22 March 1930, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Shachtman to Spector, Swabeck, Dunne (separate letters), 26 April 1930, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers; Trotsky to the Editorial Board of *The Militant*, 26 March 1930, "Prospects of the Communist League of America," in *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement I, 1929–1933*, 31–32.

confidence, and he enjoyed the possibilities that international collaboration posed. With Trotsky impressed with his capabilities and commitment, Shachtman pushed forward somewhat his own involvements on the international front. "I am stopping in Berlin in an attempt to push through the unification of the Wedding and Leninbund minority groups, which has thus far reached a standstill," Shachtman wrote to his closest confidant of the time, Marty Abern. "At my suggestion, a sort of 'international commission' has been formed to meet in Berlin for this purpose, composed of [Pierre] Naville, [Hynek] Lenorovic, and myself. What we will accomplish there is of course to be seen; I am sure though that some rather prompt measures have to be taken if we are not to suffer a setback in Germany. The prospects are nothing short of excellent; only the subjective factor is lacking." Trotsky, who would later come to have qualms about Shachtman's freewheeling capacity to "play with ideas" and "make combinations," trusted the accomplished and urbane American, as indeed he did most supporters who made their way to his household in exile. He had little appreciation, in February – March 1930, of how much of the "subjective factor" Shachtman would bring to his work in the emerging International Left Opposition.¹⁰⁵

If Shachtman's European sojourn was short it nevertheless proved quite consequential in terms of solidifying ties of trust with Trotsky, on the one hand and, on the other, consolidating personal relations with figures in European Left Opposition movements. Indeed, Shachtman quickly became something of Trotsky's "representative" or "commissar for foreign affairs" as the Left Opposition forces in France, especially, but also in Germany and Spain, struggled to find their feet. This happened largely by accident, in which the timing of Shachtman's visit coincided with important developments in the nascent Left Opposition. Trotsky himself was restricted in his movements and could not attend events in France and elsewhere. Shachtman, with the freedoms of a US passport, and the political distance that a background in the American communist movement provided vis-à-vis the often acrimonious relations prevailing among the leading comrades of the European Left Opposition groups, as well as his facility with languages, seemed a suitable surrogate. The American Trotskyist happened to be available at the very time that the German and French Left Opposition groups were forming, and the lack of an international organization a pressing absence that needed to be rectified. At a 6 April 1930 conference,

105 Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 34; Shachtman to Abern, 22 March 1930, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Trotsky to Glotzer, 3 June 1932, "Shachtman's Character," in *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement I, 1929–1933*, 118–119.

then, the International Left Opposition rather grandiosely announced its formation, establishing as well the new organization's International Bureau (IB); all of this occurred with Trotsky's full approval and Shachtman's direct involvement.

A somewhat ineffective body, the IB was established after Shachtman spent two weeks with Trotsky in Prinkipo and, with Pierre Naville, helped in the consolidation of the German United Opposition. This proved necessary after Hugo Urbahns broke from the Left Opposition, resulting in the decisive fracturing of the Leninbund. Shachtman and Naville did their utmost to insure that Kurt Landau would retain a decisive leadership position in the new Berlin-based body, in spite of forceful complaint from those Trotskyists expelled from Urbahns' Leninbund that Landau was unacceptable as a member of the leading committee. It was around this same time that the Ligue Communiste (Opposition) also came into being in France. Minuscule in numbers and influence in the mass organizations of the working class – Jean van Heijenoort describes an organization with little structure and barely 20 active members while Isaac Deutscher refers to a “puny organization giving itself the airs and the constitution of a much larger body” – the Ligue nonetheless was born divided. It was hived off into separate and often competing factional components: a National Executive, a Paris Committee, and a proletarian but virtually autonomous Jewish Group. Instructed by Trotsky, Shachtman carried with him to the founding conference of the ILO and its International Bureau a manifesto drafted by “the Old Man” in Turkey, containing a series of concrete proposals for the international work of the Left Opposition. These were no doubt aimed at resolving a number of irksome and constantly disputatious issues. Much of the contentiousness in the European sections turned on personalized animosities pitting various figures against one another. Glotzer, introduced to the French Ligue in the summer of 1931, was astounded at the level of bitterness and vehemence that punctuated local meetings of the Opposition, citing the case of one leading comrade ostensibly having thrown a table at another during a heated political debate. Trotsky was more than aware that many of the European leaders, such as Landau, had histories of opportunistic maneuvering that needed to be decisively curbed and corrected if the ILO and its International Bureau were to function effectively. Centrally important political questions did indeed arise, but they tended to reveal an unhealthy appetite for compromising basic Left Opposition principles.

In France, the most pressing contentious issue was the trade union question, where a triumvirate of Naville, Pierre Gourget, and Alfred Rosmer, ensconced in the grandiosely designated National Executive, harbored syndicalist tendencies. Even before the formation of the Ligue Communiste, they had promoted a

Unitary Opposition among trade unionists that glossed over essential political differences between rightist elements expelled from the Communist Party and advocates of the programmatic direction of the Left Opposition. When Trotsky objected, Gourget, who was expelled from the Party in 1925 and had long experience in the Communist-led French trade union federation, the *Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire* (CGTU), countered with the usual syndicalist objections against party “control” of the trade unions. Standing with Trotsky against Gourget, Naville, and Rosmer, was Raymond Molinier, a fast-talking and energetic advocate of action who built his base of support within the Paris Committee through some fairly shadowy and shady financial undertakings. Shachtman’s brief but decisive Parisian sojourn, then, was undertaken at precisely the historic moment that critical decisions were being taken and blocs and alliances, if not coherent policies, forming. Trotsky no doubt expected his chosen emissary to bring to meetings and founding conferences the written manifesto that he had entrusted to him, thus insuring that the ILO and its International Bureau would be forged on a firm political foundation.¹⁰⁶ Instead, Shachtman either fell prey to or directly contributed to the very same personalized clique factionalism that he also had a hand in developing in the United States Left Opposition.

Shachtman participated in the April 1930 ILO conference with Naville, Rosmer, Landau and, through correspondence, with the Spanish representative, Andrés Nin, undoubtedly cultivating ties with this group. Shachtman and Rosmer were two of the three signatories that appeared under the initial announcement of the Left Opposition’s Provisional International Secretariat in March 1930. Naville, in particular, seems to have worked closely with Shachtman during his time in Berlin and Paris in March – April 1930. As a young

106 The above paragraphs draw on “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 363–364; *Dog Days*, 17–30, 613 and Trotsky to Shachtman, “The April Conference: A Disappointment in All Respects,” 16 April 1930, 83–86; Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 252–254, 344–348, 407–411; Martin Abern, “For an International Conference of the Left” and “The Need for Organizing the World Opposition,” *The Militant*, 15 February 1930; “Unifying the Left Opposition,” *The Militant*, 29 March 1930; Roman Well, “The Split in the Leninbund,” *The Militant*, 5 April 1930; Leon Trotsky, “An Open Letter to All Members of the Leninbund,” *The Militant*, 29 March 1930; Ruth Fischer, *Stalin and German Communism: A Study in the Origins of the State of the Party* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 605; Glotzer, *Trotsky: Memoir & Critique*, 29–30, 40; Glotzer to Shachtman, 24 October 1931, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast*, 49–62; Jean van Heijenoort, *With Trotsky in Exile: From Prinkipo to Coyoacán* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), esp. 1–2; Trotsky, “Unifying the Left Opposition,” 8 February 1930, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky* [1930], 98–99. Gourget would quit the French Ligue in 1931 over a dispute arising out of a miners’ strike. See International Secretariat, Minutes, 12 May 1931, Roll 5, Reel 3348, MS Papers.

writer whose past included an apprenticeship in rebellion in the Surrealist movement and then journeyman days in the French Communist Party until he was expelled in 1928, Naville was accomplished in the *literary* initiatives of the revolutionary movement. His activities were almost entirely concentrated in the editing of various publications, including the pro-Left Opposition journal *La lutte des classes* and the more popularly-oriented, *La Vérité*, which Trotsky welcomed enthusiastically upon its appearance in August 1929. Born in 1904, the same year as his American counterpart, Naville was precisely the kind of Left Oppositionist Shachtman gravitated to instinctually, attracted as he was to the literary side of the movement and those theoretically educated in Marxism. Shachtman was captivated by Naville's cultural verve and was prone to pass over too cavalierly his lack of experience in working-class movements and his tendency toward opportunism in trade union policies.

Molinier, in contrast, would likely have been dismissed by Shachtman. Naville's opponent was perhaps too easily reduced intellectually to a crude and wooden materialist, uninhibited, to be sure, by bourgeois convention, but lacking in the grace of theoretical sophistication. His strengths in terms of getting things done even if a few corners had to be cut, and fitting in to the workers' movement and its organizations, would have been downgraded as of little consequence. Molinier's bombast, dubious dealings, and tendencies to overdramatization, going so far as to even physically threaten opponents, would only have further confirmed in Shachtman a less than positive assessment. It is difficult not to see the American Left Oppositionist as regarding Molinier as little more than a thuggish and hucksterist caricature of Cannon, for whom, in 1930, Shachtman had lost his past regard and respect. The result was that Shachtman exhibited no difficulty in assimilating into the clique factionalism that united Rosmer, Naville, and Landau, and that solidified on the basis of sophistication, intellectualism, and theoretical dexterity, all of which ended up posed against Molinier. Issues of principled political coherence and consistency apparently took a back seat to other more immediate alignments.

Shachtman would later confess to Trotsky that he had indeed failed to present Trotsky's proposals to the ILO's April 1930 conference. Shachtman, in collaboration with Naville and Rosmer, thus buried and obscured a series of political disagreements that threatened to disrupt the event which, in any case, *La Vérité* did little to promote as an undertaking that would indeed chart a course of principled activity. A certain "chumminess" triumphed as Shachtman, Naville, Rosmer, and Landau orchestrated the ILO's founding and the establishment of its International Bureau. Cannon later commented that Trotsky "detested this," and that this accent on sociability was rife in "The European groups of the Left Opposition in the early days ... He accused Naville in France,

Landau in Germany, who were both very bright intellectuals and several others, of hanging out together out of chumminess. As differences arose, they always tended to hold together." Shachtman functioned as midwife to the birth of this deformity.¹⁰⁷

Trotsky, long disappointed by the delays and prevarications that postponed the formal establishment of the International Left Opposition and the organizational apparatus of an International Bureau that might direct its important work, was troubled by misplaced understandings of the relations between the ILO and its national sections. "Among certain elements in the Opposition the struggle against bureaucratic centralism has revived a non-Marxist conception of the reciprocal relationship between the national sections and the international organization," he wrote, "according to which the national sections are the foundation and walls and the international organization is the roof to be added later at the end." This insight fit well with his later realization that initial European converts to the Left Opposition were often "Individuals and little grouplets, predominantly of intellectual or semi-intellectual character, without clear political views and without roots in the working class." Such "political nomads," accustomed to "neither serious work nor to responsibility," were not the human material out of which a revolutionary mobilization could be forged. Rather, they tended to carry "cheap political formulas, smart critical phrases, and practice in intrigue from town to town and country to country." The failure of the April 1930 conference to be anything other than a "*mute*" event, disturbed Trotsky greatly. It confirmed in his mind that Naville, Rosmer, Shachtman and others who failed to rally the committed to the standard of the Left Opposition, and dispense with those who could not come to agreement with basic principles, let the Left Opposition down. In Trotsky's judgment, they missed a critical opportunity to consolidate advocates and separate out from them vacillating and confused elements. "I indict you directly," Trotsky wrote to "my dear Shachtman," asking him pointedly how it was that specific proposals never made their way to the conference delegates, 99 percent of whom Trotsky was sure "would doubtlessly be for the adoption of a manifesto of this sort."

Shachtman's first exercise in European international work obviously erred on the side of diplomacy and cliquism, necessitating a slap on the wrist from

¹⁰⁷ "In the Opposition Ranks: International Left Forms Provisional Bureau," *The Militant*, 5 April 1930. For a suggestion of Shachtman's regard for Naville's importance see Glotzer to Shachtman, 24 October 1931, Reel 20 JPC Papers. Glotzer had clearly been pressed by Shachtman for his opinion of Naville, but withheld judgment. In Glotzer's memoirs, *Trotsky*, 32, there is suggestion of Naville's national chauvinism. Cannon's recollection of Trotsky's antagonism to "chumminess" is in Ring interview, 23 February 1974.

Trotsky himself. This personal corrective was supplemented with a circular letter to all in the ILO that chastised the lack of forward movement coming out of the April 1930 conference. Indeed, the failure of the International Bureau to function adequately would characterize the 1930–31 years. One reason for its lackadaisical performance was that it operated, in effect, as a subset of the Ligue Communiste, a group that never managed to overcome its intensely personal factional rivalries and cultivate a responsible leadership rooted implacably in the ideas of the Left Opposition. Trotsky's political secretary, Jan Frankel, wrote to Shachtman in November 1931, referring to the ineffectiveness of the International Secretariat, an expanded body formed in the aftermath of October 1930 discussions of Trotsky, Molinier, Naville, M. Mill (Jacques Obin/Pavel Okun), a leader of the Paris Jewish Group, and others in Prinkipo. Convened to address disputes in the French Ligue, the meeting proposed the formation of this Secretariat as an administrative arm of the IB elected at the April 1930 conference. It had achieved nothing, Frankel asserted, because, "The past weighs like lead on it," and this past was heavy with the inability to function in a principled communist fashion and in its restricted organizational dependence on the compromised French section. The Ligue was routinely ordered by a clique factionalism that stifled principled politics. Trotsky himself grew extremely frustrated with the Naville-Rosmer-Landau axis, telling Shachtman that, "I am making no compromises and if the Naville-Landau brotherhood persists in its course, it means a complete break with them." The problem with this duo, Trotsky concluded, is that "they can go just as easily one way as another. ... they must feel in their own bones, their mental bones, that there are ideas with which one does not trifle."

Rosmer had other crosses to bear, and would soon make his exit from the Left Opposition, but Trotsky acknowledged that he brought with him into the French section old habits of anarcho-syndicalism that treated organizational questions cavalierly. Trotsky, who regarded Rosmer as an old friend, nonetheless conceded that he did not have the makeup of a revolutionary: "He is happy working in a group of good friends but cannot bear internal conflicts at all, reacting in such cases by leaving the field to the combatants." Most decisively, Trotsky insisted that the French section's abandonment of trade union policy to Gourget, and his confused theses that subordinated the orientation of the Ligue Communiste to blocs with CGTU forces antagonistic to the actual program of the Left Opposition, be rejected. Naville, pressed by Trotsky to respond to such criticism, prevaricated, as the pages of *La Vérité* were cluttered with public debate over the matter. As Glotzer traveled through Paris en route to Prinkipo in October 1931, he found the discussion of the trade union question in the French section and its press incomprehensible and fraught with reversals of

an almost weekly kind. "The entire question is still in a fog," he communicated to Shachtman, "and I hope that it will clear shortly." Trotsky was at his political wit's end, but he managed to summon sufficient restraint to advise Shachtman: "Do not support Comrade Naville's wavering or even go easy on him, but prove to him most emphatically that beginning with the key trade-union question he must orient himself to principle and not according to personal motives." This message never quite got through. The unwholesome atmosphere in the French section continued into later years. In 1933 Trotsky would write that, "Almost from the very beginning of the existence of the French League, its inner life represented a series of crises that never reached the level of principles, but distinguished themselves by extreme bitterness and poisoned the atmosphere of the organization, repelling serious workers despite their sympathies for the ideas of the Opposition." Trotsky understood that the French Left Opposition must either move "*forward ... or backward* to small circles stewing in their own juices." Too often, in the years to come, the movement was in reverse, as evidenced by Trotsky's repeated interventions into what came to be known as "the crisis of the French section."¹⁰⁸

108 The above paragraphs draw on an extensive array of evidence. Among many sources relevant to understanding Trotsky's disappointment concerning the April 1930 conference see Trotsky to the Executive Committee of the French League, 25 September 1930 and Trotsky, "Circular Letter No. 1," 21 June 1930, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky* [1930], 386–388, 290–297; *Dog Days*, 14–30, with Trotsky quoted on 22, 24, and Shachtman quoted on 28, and important documents reproduced as follows: Trotsky to Shachtman, 16 April 1930, "The April Conference: A Disappointment in All Respects," 83–86; Trotsky to Shachtman, 18 August 1930, "Where Is The International Secretariat," 86–89; Trotsky to Shachtman, 25 November 1930, "Crisis in the French League," 92–98; Trotsky to Shachtman, 6 January 1931, "Landau Has Proven to Be a Very Unreliable Fellow," 102–105; Trotsky to Shachtman, 23 May 1931, "You Bear Some Responsibility for Landau's Course," 114–116; Trotsky to Shachtman, 2 August 1931, "Naville Plays with Ideas," 117–118; Frankel to Shachtman, 14 November 1931, "Get the Secretariat's Cart Out of the Mud," 119–120; Trotsky to Shachtman, 11 December 1931, "Who Then Should Lead the Ligue?" 132; Trotsky to Shachtman, "You Were Never on Our Side," 25 December 1931, 133–134; and the quotations of Trotsky to Naville, 25 November 1930, and subsequent commentary, appearing in n. 246, 626; Leon Trotsky, "The Mistakes of Rightist Elements of the Communist League on the Trade Union Question," 4 January 1931, in Trotsky, *Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay (1920–1940)* (New York: Pathfinder, 1990), also in Trotsky, *Communism and Syndicalism*, 53–63; Glotzer to Shachtman, 24 October 1931, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Trotsky, "It is Time to Stop," 18 September 1933 in *Writings of Leon Trotsky* [1933–1934] (New York: Pathfinder, 1972), 88; Leon Trotsky, *The Crisis of the French Section [1935–1936]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1977). For discussion of these issues in the Communist League of America, National Executive Committee, see Minutes, 12 June 1931, Box 35, File 5, GB Papers.

Little of all of this was known, at first, within the Communist League of America. Shachtman fell heir to his *de facto* position as the League's European liaison and Trotsky's emissary largely by default. On both sides of the Atlantic there was insufficient organizational discussion and preparation of Shachtman's role. Correspondence between Shachtman and Trotsky was, for the most part, private and not directed to the CLA's National Committee. Maurice Spector wrote the initial *Militant* article announcing the formation of the ILO and its International Bureau. It managed to accent the blunders of the Leninbund and Urbahns while avoiding entirely any mention of the disputes within the French section around trade union issues or the sectarian stand of the Parisian Bordigist Prometeo Group, which resisted Trotsky's call for a united front to oppose the advance of Hitler in Germany. In short, the article obscured what was happening in the April 1930 conference to an American readership, just as Shachtman and his European allies papered over differences in Paris. Shachtman's follow-up article continued this obfuscation, but exacerbated it by praising the French Ligue, its publications, *and* its trade union policies and practices. Shachtman suggested that the Opposition was forming "a substantial fraction in the Red trade union center (CGTU) which fights the stupid policies of the Party leadership as it combats the liquidationist tendencies represented by the Right wing 'pure' syndicalist minority in the trade unions." Not a hint appeared in Shachtman's account that Trotsky was opposing the French Ligue's labor orientation and that there existed significant internal dispute within the small Left Opposition forces in Paris relating to precisely this question of trade union policy.¹⁰⁹

By November 1930 Trotsky was exasperated enough to write Shachtman in condemnation of Naville and Gourget: "Gourget undertook to work out these theses together with a semi-Communist who stands outside the Ligue. What he produced is a political/trade union platform cobbled together from syndicalist, Communist, and reformist fragments. ... Naville's attitude has been so wavering and ambiguous No one knows what conclusions Naville will draw from the situation, because unfortunately he is not accustomed to being guided by principled and organizational motives, instead of personal and sentimental ones." A mere ten months after the Spector-Shachtman articles were appearing in the press of the Communist League of America, Cannon was writing his introduction to Trotsky's *Communism and Syndicalism* pamphlet, the conclud-

109 Maurice Spector, "A New Stage of the International Communist Opposition," *The Militant*, 26 April 1930; Max Shachtman, "The International Opposition Conference," *The Militant*, 3 May 1930.

ing statement of which would be a direct criticism of “the mistakes of some French Oppositionists.” Trotsky complained that, “Beginning with April 1930, the League, in effect, gave up independent work in the trade unions for the benefit of the Unitary Opposition which, on its part, strives to have its own platform, its leadership, its party.” Troubled by the extent to which this Unitary Opposition contained “elements who are obviously tending towards the Right Opposition, that is, towards reformism,” Trotsky deplored any maneuvering that would serve to “cover up” mistakes, vacillations, and lack of political precision on the part of his European followers. He noted that such a cover up was in fact “the policy of the editorial board of *La Vérité* – a policy of silence and this was not by chance.” At this point Trotsky severed relations with Landau in the German Opposition, despairing that he would ever transcend the cliquist “circle-conservatism” that made principles expendable but protection of leaders mandatory.

Landau’s “chummy” relations with the Naville forces in the French section, a grouping that demonstrated a decided lack of resolve on trade union errors, were especially irksome. This facilitated the undercutting of Molinier (who had consolidated a majority in the Ligue by this point) and his efforts, in Trotsky’s view, to correct the worsening political scene within the Ligue:

Syndicalism is at present the specific form of opportunism in France. ... To recognize the opportunist content underneath this form and to unmask it is the first task of the French communists. The old leadership of the French League did not do this, in spite of warnings and advice. This led to the fact that a semisyndicalist faction formed itself inside the League, which, working in the trade unions, became a high *wall* between the League and the trade unions instead of a *link* between them. ... the personal connections of Landau were with the French group that was conducting a false policy, [and] Landau systematically prevented the German Opposition from taking a correct position on this central question. The policy of concealment, reservations, and maneuvers on the French question is being continued by the German leadership to this very day. More than that! Comrade Landau lets no opportunity pass to attack the new leadership of the League, which strives to correct the old mistakes.

Soon thereafter, in July 1931, with Landau contributing to the Naville-edited theoretical journal, *La Lutte des Classes*, Trotsky cut off contact with the publication. All clearly was not quiet on the French and German fronts of the European Left Opposition.

Shachtman contributed considerably to the muting of this political differentiation. Trotsky admonished him in May 1931:

it seemed to me that if the leading comrades of the national sections had energetically put pressure on Landau in time, it would perhaps – I say perhaps – have been possible to save him. Unfortunately that is no longer the case, and you bear a small part of the responsibility for that. After Landau, to be sure, the lion's share is borne by Naville, who filled Landau with false hopes, sent him equivocal information, etc. And now Landau wants nothing to do with the International Secretariat and is assiduously in the process of forming his own international with the Prometeo people, with Gourget, with ... Weisbord for America. ... So, my dear Shachtman, I bear the responsibility for your not being on good terms with Weisbord. Naville, will be forced to embark on the same path. ... Those whom he influences are hostile to us and they really mean it. Naville, however, plays with ideas and is never serious or honest. He is staying in the Ligue in order to sabotage it from within and help Landau to set up the new international.

The American Trotskyist clearly had some explaining to do on his home ground of the Communist League of America.¹¹⁰

Yet explanations were anything but forthcoming. Even among his close factional supporters – Spector, Glotzer, Abern – there is little indication that Shachtman shared much about the *politics* of his European sojourn in 1930. When he made his way back to Europe in the fall of 1931 for a two month sojourn, a longstanding pattern of light, jocular, gossipy, essentially apolitical correspondence continued. Shachtman wrote to Glotzer, then staying with Trotsky on Prinkipo, in October 1931: “do you intend to stay in Turkey for the rest of your life, or do you want to breakaway and meet me in England, where we shall sure as hell overthrow the government?” Spector would later have cause to chastise Shachtman for not keeping his close collaborators adequately

110 The documents republished in *Dog Days* provide an exemplary overview of developments outlined in the above paragraphs. For the quotations above see Trotsky to Shachtman, 17 November 1930, “Crisis in the French League,” 92–98; Trotsky to Shachtman, “Landau Has Proven to Be A Very Unreliable Fellow,” 102–105; Trotsky to Shachtman, 4 April 1931, “What is Your Position on the German Crisis?” 108; Trotsky to Shachtman, 23 May 1931, “You Bear Some Responsibility for Landau’s Course,” 114–116; Trotsky to Shachtman, 2 August 1931, “Naville Plays with Ideas,” 117–118; Trotsky, *Communism and Syndicalism*, 59–63; Leon Trotsky, “The Crisis in the German Left Opposition,” 17 February 1931, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1930–1937]*, esp. 154.

informed as to international issues of significance.¹¹¹ Meanwhile, *The Militant* featured Kurt Landau's byline regularly in coverage of German events.¹¹²

Overawed by "the Old Man" upon meeting him on the island of Prinkipo, Shachtman was stung by the private criticism that Trotsky meted out to him in subsequent correspondence relating to the failures of the ILO's International Bureau/Secretariat and, more pointedly, in being chastised for an apparent tendency to value personal solidarities over principled politics. Shachtman, like Glotzer, was no doubt surprised at how little Trotsky engaged in small talk, especially as it related to matters that could be considered personal as opposed to political, and this may have played a part in keeping discussions between the two Left Oppositionists entirely on specific terrain. The consequence was that in this first phase of contact with Trotsky, there appears to have been little mention of factionalism within the Communist League of America and, up until March 1932, Glotzer and Shachtman refrained from letting Trotsky know of their criticisms of Cannon. This was later cause for consternation among the anti-Cannon group. It also confused international comrades. Pierre Frank, a Molinier ally in the French Ligue, wrote to Glotzer about the internal relations of the American League in the autumn of 1932. He seemed genuinely bewildered, unable to discern a political basis for the tensions. "The only way to overcome the crisis," he suggested, was "to explain the difficulties by political reasons and to establish a program for the League. Then you should have a real discussion (not on a few words of Engels nor on a 'Carter Group' ...). In a serious discussion, the other sections of the LO could say something." In addition, Frank was reluctant to accept what he claimed Glotzer had suggested to Trotsky, that the silence of the two CLA members around the issue of League factionalism was the result of "a decision of your National Committee." For Frank, this was preposterous: "I can not believe such a decision and I can less believe your acceptance of it ... such a decision would be enough to make an intervention to all the sections. ... [Shachtman] and you came to Europe, you have been with about one month the leader of our organization, the most

111 Shachtman to Glotzer, 3 November 1931, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 56; Spector to Shachtman, 10 May 1932, "You Must Take Us Into Your Confidence," *Dog Days*, 220–222, and, for Glotzer-Spector discussion of the International Secretariat and its problems, Glotzer to Spector, 3 February 1932, "We Should have Informed Trotsky of American Problems," 147–148, and quoting Spector to Swabeck, 5 March 1932, noting "the failure of the International Secretariat to function in either political or administrative regard," necessitating its reorganization, fn. 301, 631.

112 Kurt Landau articles in *The Militant* include: "The Danger of Fascism in Germany," 15 August 1930; "The Election Results," 1 October 1930; "Where is Thaelman Leading the German Party?" 1 November 1930; "The International Conference of the Right," 1 March 1931.

experienced man in the workers movement and you are quiet about the difficulties of your organization. It is true we shall not trouble him with nonsense, but I don't think you are fighting for nonsense."¹¹³

Shachtman, for his part, tended to respond to Trotsky directly, if defensively. He deflected criticism by insisting that anything he did was in the best interests of the ILO. Shachtman claimed that it was necessary to work more closely with Naville, Rosmer, and Landau and not wage the fight against them too sharply; that he was motivated by a genuine concern to avoid premature and debilitating splits in the Opposition; and that Trotsky's faith in Molinier was misplaced.¹¹⁴

The situation merely worsened as time went on. Shachtman's and Glotzer's October – December 1931 European leaves of absence from the CLA, with Glotzer helping around Trotsky's security in Turkey and then meeting up with

113 On Shachtman's being overawed by Trotsky see "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 351–353; and for Glotzer's and Shachtman's first airing of their views of factionalism in the CLA, see *Dog Days*: Shachtman to Trotsky, 13 March 1932, "A Bad Situation in the American League," 170–173; Glotzer to Trotsky, 5 April 1932, "The Real Basis of Our Differences," 187–197. Glotzer's claim in *Trotsky*, 68–71 that he discussed the factionalism in the CLA with Trotsky in the autumn of 1931 is clearly wrong, countered by his communication with Spector of 3 February 1932, "We Should Have Informed Trotsky of American Problems," *Dog Days*, 148: "we have made a horrible error in keeping from LD the situation in the North American movement. All the more so since Max and myself have been to see him. I have a feeling that this will, sooner or later, create a scandal – and that comrade LD will certainly spare no words with us on this account. But this is what we get for pan-handling political situations We postponed for fear of destroying the organization only to find ourselves outwitted, unintentionally, so that it in no way helps our movement. It would have been better to have settled the question than allow it to eat on us like a cancer." Note also Glotzer to Trotsky, 5 April 1932, "The Real Basis of Our Differences," *Dog Days*, 187, where Glotzer apologizes for not reporting on the factional situation in the American League in 1931, even when Trotsky asked him directly about such matters: "I denied that we had any internal situation in the American League." Spector would write to Shachtman, 1 March 1932, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers: "I will have to explain the diffidence and natural reluctance to be accused of tale-bearing, the hope too of painless solutions that actuated both you and Glotzer in never breathing a word to him [Trotsky] of the US internal position." For Frank's comments note Glotzer to Shachtman, 2 November 1932, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers. See Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 73–74 for Glotzer's reaction to Trotsky's refusal to say anything about Stalin, responding to queries with the terse statement, "Everything I have to say about him I have already written."

114 Again, the documents in *Dog Days* cover this ground well: Shachtman to Trotsky, 17 December 1930, "We Must Endeavor to Collaborate with Naville and Rosmer," 98–101; Shachtman to Trotsky, 4 March 1931, "The Fight Against Landau and Naville is Too Sharp," 106–107; Shachtman to Trotsky, 2 May 1931, "I Sought to Avoid a Premature Split in the German Section," 112–113; Shachtman to Trotsky, 1 December 1931, "Molinier is Far From Correct," 121–131.

Shachtman in Britain to aid in the establishment of an ILO section, and Shachtman also undertaking International Secretariat work in France and Spain, further exacerbated relations with Trotsky. So, too, did Shachtman's mishandling of Trotsky's literary affairs. He tried to market some of Trotsky's Left Opposition writings to the bourgeois press and Independent Labour Party publications. This impolitic journalistic miscue earned Shachtman a stiff rebuke. Trotsky was irate that his revolutionary writings would be flogged to inappropriate venues, especially those of the "English Mensheviks," where the danger existed that a political fraternization could be falsely assumed from the fact of publication. "I will tell you my opinion quite openly," an unpleasantly surprised Trotsky wrote to Shachtman, "you have the tendency to see things much too much from the journalistic or writer's standpoint at the expense of the political and the revolutionary. That explains why we collide with you in all questions" Glotzer, aware of Trotsky's disappointments, was worried enough to write Shachtman that, "the old man may break ... relations with us." Of particular concern was that Trotsky now extended Shachtman's clique circle to include the Spanish Left Oppositionist, Andrés Nin, and the French Jewish Group leader, M. Mill. Nin, by 1931, was already exhibiting tendencies to isolate himself from the ILO, resist the imperative need to develop the Spanish section as a revolutionary current *within* an international movement and, finally, like Naville, conciliating elements who could not be assimilated to what Trotsky considered revolutionary politics in order to secure some immediate, but unsustainable, advance.¹¹⁵

In France, Mill and the Jewish Group, whom Trotsky would come to see as having influence over Shachtman and Glotzer, deepened problems in trade union policy, aligning with Naville. They resisted a push to promote liquidation of communist-led unions so that Left Opposition workers could integrate into the mainstream reformist labor movement. Promoted by the Trotsky-supported group of Molinier, Frank, and Albert Trient (a former leading Communist Party figure who expelled many Trotskyists in the mid-1920s, said to combine Zinovievist inclinations with fixations on the correctness of his past behaviors), this orientation lacked the subtlety of the CLA's more two-sided approach to dual unionism. It nonetheless probably accorded more closely to Trotsky's orientation, forged as it was against the sectarianism of the Third Period. With the ILO's International Secretariat under the thumb of Naville-Mill, Nin's appetite for fusion with the Right Opposition group in Spain was

115 Trotsky to Shachtman, 31 December 1931, "Too Much the Journalist," *Dog Days*, 136–138; Glotzer to Shachtman, 21 October 1932, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers. As an introduction only to Nin and Spain see Leon Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution (1931–1939)* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973).

placated and the ongoing antagonism to the Ligue leadership of Raymond Molinier was encouraged, with Rosmer and the Jewish Group drawn into an alliance. Tired of the carping at Molinier, whose negative sides he acknowledged, Trotsky lost patience with Shachtman's pandering to disruptive, unstable elements in the ILO. When articles appeared in *The Militant*, written by Mill, calling for the unity of Right and Left Oppositions in Spain, Trotsky's indulgence was at an end. In December 1931 he wrote two unambiguously sharp letters to Shachtman, raking him over the coals for his "European work":

I must regretfully note that you have drawn absolutely no conclusions from the bad experience beginning with the international conference of April 1930. The difficult situation in the French Ligue is to a certain extent also thanks to you because, directly or indirectly, you always supported those elements who acted as a brake or as a disintegrating force, such as the Naville group. You now transfer your support to Mill At one time you published in the *Militant* (as did *La Vérité*!) two scandalous reports by Mill from Spain that misled the entire international Opposition. These reports demonstrated that Mill is incapable of finding his way correctly After a year of struggle against Rosmer and Naville he has suddenly begun to cling to them. In your letter you semiaffectionately call this stupid. ... for the permanent secretary of the International Secretariat one must seek sharper and more political characterizations. Your conduct in Spain was also wrong The Spanish comrades, especially Nin, have committed every mistake imaginable What you say about the German Opposition sounds like an echo of your old sympathies for Landau In the struggle that we waged here against the accidental, used-up, or down-right demoralized elements, you, dear Shachtman, were never on our side, and those concerned (Rosmer, Naville, Landau, and now Mill) have always felt that they were backed in large measure by the American League.¹¹⁶

116 The Mill articles appeared in *The Militant* under the name of J. Obin. See "What is Happening in Spain?" 15 May 1931; "First of May in Madrid," 1 June 1931. With Shachtman associated with Naville-Mill and Glotzer having been linked to the Parisian Jewish Group, it is not surprising that Trotsky took umbrage at these articles appearing in the publication of the CLA. For Glotzer and the Jewish Group see Glotzer to NC, CLA, 10 October 1931; 13 October 1931, appended to CLA, National Committee Minutes, 8 (?) October 1931, Box 35, File 5, GB Papers; Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 30, 39–40; Trotsky to the CLA, National Committee, "Why Did the *Militant* Print Felix's Article?" 5 January 1932 and Glotzer to Trotsky, 21 January 1932, "I Do Not Agree With Shachtman," *Dog Days*, 139–140, 141–144. Trotsky's December 1931/January 1932 criticisms of Shachtman, public and private, appear in Trotsky to Shachtman, 11 December 1931, "Who Then Should Lead the Ligue?" 132; Trotsky to Shachtman,

At his political wit's end, Trotsky informed Shachtman that he was writing formally to the Communist League of America, "so that at least in the future our European struggle will be less influenced by your personal connections, sympathies, etc." In his letter to the National Committee of the CLA, Trotsky reported that his efforts "to find a common language with [Shachtman] in the most disputed European questions were never crowned with success. It always appeared to me that Comrade Shachtman was and still is guided in these questions which were somewhat remote from America, more by personal and journalistic sympathies, than by fundamental political consideration." Shachtman, Trotsky continued, undermined "the struggle which the progressive elements of the Opposition have been conducting for a long time," appearing to act "by the authority of the American section." This, of course, raised the bar of rejoinder within the CLA, where there was already resentment in Cannon's New York circles that the Shachtman, Spector, Glotzer, Abern bloc was shirking the necessary work of the National Committee and the editorial tasks associated with *The Militant*. Spector advised Shachtman repeatedly to "dispel any lurking suspicion the Old Man may still entertain that you have a predilection for Naville or Landau," noting that, "You will readily appreciate how avidly unscrupulous elements exploit such situations as the Old Man's correspondence with you and our Committee." He pleaded with Shachtman to "re-double all efforts ... to straighten out any lines of entanglement and misconception that have complicated your relations with L.D." Because Trotsky admonished Shachtman not to "give up his post as editor of *The Militant*," Spector added that, "I am not sure that it was the wisest measure of you to withdraw from the editorship of the *Militant* ... it gives les autres yet another opportunity, demagogically, to parade as the old guard who bravely carried on under the withering hail fire of adversity – though we may privately know a different version."¹¹⁷

Within Shachtman's ranks, the public humiliation of December 1931, linking a key figure in the anti-Cannon camp to Naville, Rosmer, Landau, Mill, and

25 December 1931, "You Were Never On Our Side," 133–135; Trotsky to the CLA National Committee, 25 December 1931, "Shachtman's Personal and Journalistic Sympathies," 135–136; Trotsky to Shachtman, 31 December 1931, "Too Much the Journalist," 136–138; Trotsky to the CLA National Committee, 5 January 1932, "Why Did the *Militant* Print Felix's Article?" 139–140, all in *Dog Days*.

117 Trotsky to Shachtman, 25 December 1931, "You Were Never On Our Side," and Trotsky to Shachtman, 10 February 1932, "You Must Remain at Your Post," in *Dog Days*, 134, 149; Trotsky to the National Committee of the Communist League of America, 25 December 1931; Trotsky to Glotzer, 19 February 1932, Roll 3, Reel 3346, MS Papers; Spector to Shachtman, 29 March 1932; 6 April 1932, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers.

others, occasioned a quick political separation from him. In the resident New York National Committee meeting of 13 January 1932, Abern moved a motion stipulating that “the point of view expressed by Comrade Shachtman [on international issues] is his personally.” Cannon pressed a counter-posed motion stipulating that such views as Shachtman put forward as a consequence of his European work for the ILO had been presented “by himself as an individual without consulting the National Committee and on his own personal responsibility. They do not represent the views of the National Committee and it takes no responsibility for them.” Glotzer voted for both motions, while Shachtman abstained. This meant that with Cannon and Swabeck voting for the Cannon motion, it alone passed. Swabeck informed Trotsky “that the National Committee as a whole [would] support the motion of comrade Cannon,” adding that it spoke “unequivocally.” Glotzer then provided a statement aligning himself with Trotsky and distancing himself from Shachtman, repudiating the Rosmer-Naville leadership of the French Ligue. He later told Trotsky that he refused “to be put in the same category with Shachtman and his views,” and harbored thoughts that Shachtman was influenced by “personal sympathies for the Naville-Mill element.” Spector also created some distance between himself and others on international questions. Chicago’s John Edwards, a veteran communist and alternate on the CLA National Committee, was particularly blunt, chastising Shachtman for his dabblings in the French Ligue, denouncing Mill as putting forward reactionary views, and distancing himself from Abern’s and Glotzer’s confused statements on the international issues. He further tore a strip off of Shachtman for *even going to Europe* the second time: “how the hell is it that you went to Europe when you knew it would be used against you? Just what was your purpose? Was it to get support from the secretariat for yourself? People do not spend hundreds of dollars on vacations without there being some political purpose. Apparently you did not go there to strengthen the hand of Trotsky.” And yet Edwards, who had a poor opinion of Cannon, remained an advocate of Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer.¹¹⁸

This was the background to the fragmented front Shachtman and Company presented at the American League’s June 1932 Plenum.¹¹⁹ For all the *political*

118 CLA, National Committee Minutes, 13 January 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers; Glotzer to Trotsky, 21 January 1932, “I Do Not Agree With Shachtman,” and Spector to Shachtman, 10 May 1932, “You Must Take Us Into Your Confidence,” in *Dog Days*, 141–144, 220–222; Spector to Shachtman, 1 March 1932; 29 March 1932; 6 April 1932; 27 April 1932; Edwards to Shachtman, 16 April 1932, Roll 10 Reel 3353, MS Papers. Swabeck to Trotsky, 22 January 1932, “Shachtman Acted on His Own Authority,” *Dog Days*, 144–146.

119 For a summary and auto-critique of these fissures in the Shachtman Group see the

distancing that was now evident, Shachtman's factional supporters remained firmly in his personal corner. As Cannon wrote to Oehler in April 1932: "Glotzer agrees with us, or says he does, on the international questions of the International Opposition, which we consider the first and most important question. Abern takes the same position, with 'reservations' and ambiguities. Shachtman, on the other hand, opposes this view, and gives more or less support, directly or indirectly, to the careerists, triflers and disintegrating elements in the European sections. But this live contradiction does not prevent them from presenting a 'united front' against us in the Committee." Such was the politics of cliquism. Among the Shachtman-aligned group the response was not so much to question positions. Many conceded they had known too little and, in any case, specific views were now in the process of revision and backtracking. Rather, the approach was to inform Trotsky about the *real* situation in the American League, which of course presented Cannon in a particularly poor light. Thus Glotzer summed up the issues as they were seen by Shachtman's closest collaborators in a report to the New York branch on the internal controversy. He deplored the "revival of [the] international question as a club with which to crush the minority, and to avoid a discussion of burning questions confronting the League." Such questions were not to be avoided, according to Glotzer, "by permitting Cannon to hide behind quotations from letters of Trotsky and drowning out a real discussion of League problems under the roar of his fire at Shachtman's international position." Glotzer stated bluntly that Cannon's strategy, against the efforts of the minority to take international issues "out of the realm of faction controversy," removing them from the "domain of quarrel," was to drag them "back into the field of dispute so as to shut out everything else." Most importantly, according to Glotzer, this was the cover suppressing "criticisms of Cannon."¹²⁰

succinct passage in Abern, Glotzer, Shachtman, "Statement of the National Committee (Minority): The Results of the Plenum of the National Committee," 29 June 1932, *Dog Days*, Paragraph 10, 320.

- 120 See the *Dog Days* documents: Glotzer to Spector, 3 February 1932, "We Should Have Informed Trotsky of American Problems," 147–149; Shachtman to Trotsky, 13 March 1932, "A Bad Situation in the American League," 170–174; Glotzer, "Draft Statement on International Questions," 15 March 1932; 177–178; Abern, "Draft Statement on the I.L.O.," 15 March 1932, 179–180; and Swabeck to the International Secretariat and Leon Trotsky, 2 April 1932, "A Definite Conflict of Views," 180–183. Note as well, Glotzer to Shachtman, 6 January 1932; 16 January 1932; 13 March 1932; 31 March 1932; Spector to Shachtman, 1 March 1932, all in Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers. Glotzer, well into 1933, complained vigorously to Shachtman and Abern that he and other Chicago comrades were in the dark about international developments. See Glotzer to Shachtman and Abern, 6 February 1933; Glotzer to Shachtman, 8 February 1933, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers. Note, finally, Cannon to Oehler, 30 April

Cannon, in turn, moved with cautious deliberation. He was himself relatively new to the issues posed by Shachtman's European initiatives and he worked to educate himself over the course of the 1931–33 years, becoming knowledgeable about the difficult history of the Russian Opposition, its supporters – both longstanding and transitory – and congruent movements in Germany and France.¹²¹ But he grasped intuitively, as Trotsky hammered away at the crises in the German and French sections and eased himself into a public criticism of Shachtman, that something was amiss. Trotsky's growing concern about the state of the French and German sections of the ILO was evident in March – April 1931, communications having been forwarded through the International Secretariat to the CLA, as well as directly to the League's National Committee. Cannon moved in the resident New York Committee meeting to have copies of all such correspondence, which focused largely on Landau's cliquism and bureaucratic centralization of authority through unprincipled expulsions of opponents, widely distributed to CLA branches, but this motion was defeated. Shachtman, privately aware that Trotsky had been questioning his judgement of Landau, blocked Cannon's call for opening the documents up to the membership, thereby restricting dissemination to National Committee members only. His motion endorsing Trotsky's practical proposals vis-à-vis

1932, Reel 3, JPC Papers and Glotzer, "Report to the New York Branch on the Internal Controversy," 1933, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers.

121 See, for an indication of his self-instruction the immense collection of speech notes in the James P. Cannon Papers. Those who insist that Cannon was backward and parochial when it came to international questions should study the reach of these notes to appreciate what Cannon was, on a weekly basis, drawing on in his agitational lectures and forums. See, for instance, Cannon, "Role of Opposition: Lecture – Open Forum – January 10, 1931," and Notes for a "Report on International Situation of the Left Opposition," 25 February 1933 [misdated 1932], Reel 33, JPC Papers. For Cannon's explicit response to the charge that he was ill-equipped to address international questions see an unpublished document written in the second half of 1932, in which Cannon addresses both the "tendency toward provincialism" characteristic of those who, like himself, came to the revolutionary movement through participation in "the native American labor movement without international orientation or guidance." In struggling to become a "thorough going internationalist," Cannon did not recommend this "slowness of orientation" to others, but he was adamant that his internationalist commitment was unwavering and longstanding, and that younger comrades needed to be aware that "superficiality and glib facility" were no substitute for serious study and contemplation. Cannon reflected that his own internationalism was steeled and tested in 1917, 1919, 1928, and 1932. On each occasion, he insisted, "I took the international question of the hour as my point of departure and subordinated everything else to it." See Joseph Hansen, "James P. Cannon The Internationalist," *Education for Socialists* (New York: Socialist Workers Party, July 1980), in a document prepared for publication by George Breitman, "A. Four Tests in Fifteen Years (1932)," 16–20.

the German section passed, but he reserved “a formulation of [the CLA’s] opinion on the political and principle issues involved in the controversy until such time as we have had further opportunity for study.” This stalling tactic bought Shachtman a few weeks grace, but it would not be long before the political cat of his relations with Landau, Naville, and others was out of the clandestine bag. A 12 June 1931 resident NC meeting raised a series of probing questions about the private nature of the Shachtman-Trotsky correspondence. It resolved that official Trotsky communications should be sent to the Secretary of the League, and commissioned Shachtman to prepare a CLA resolution on the crises in the ILO that could be submitted to the National Committee after it was vetted by Cannon and Swabeck. Shachtman’s motion to have reportage on the international events in *The Militant* restricted to an unsigned article was defeated, with Glotzer moving a successful compromise resolution to have the National Committee’s conclusions published under the signature of the League’s leading body. Cannon’s more rigorous call to have the NC draft a programmatic resolution on the international issues and publish it under the resident Committee’s signature was voted down. Swabeck wrote to Trotsky to inform him that the CLA was producing a comprehensive statement on developments in the ILO, condemning Landau’s regime as well as repudiating the trade union orientation of Gourget within the French Ligue. Throughout all of this, Shachtman claimed that he had been subject to a “whispering campaign which has gone on for nine months that I am a Landau or Naville,” allegations that he considered base and without merit.¹²²

Shachtman, in for a rough ride with Trotsky over the next months, saw his own faction members – a majority on the resident New York NC – duck for cover. Cannon nonetheless grasped how firm the Shachtman-Abern-Glotzer-Spector clique held together. The Shachtman report was apparently delayed for the summer, appearing only days before the CLA’s Second Conference and a National Committee Plenum convened on 24 September 1931. In spite of a sharp summer correspondence between Trotsky and Shachtman around the issue of Naville, the matter never came up in the International report to the League’s

122 *Dog Days*, 28–29; Trotsky, “Crisis in the German Left Opposition,” Trotsky to Shachtman, 23 May 1931, and Trotsky, “Some Ideas on the Period and the Tasks of the Left Opposition,” 28 July 1931, all in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1930–1931]*, 147–170, 238–239, 293–297; Trotsky to the Executive of the Communist League of America, 4 April 1931; Roll 3, Reel 3346; Max Shachtman Statement/Resolutions, 1932–1933, “Report to the New York Branch on the Internal Controversy,” Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers; CLA, National Committee Minutes of the Meeting of April 27 1931, appended Trotsky to International Secretariat of the Left Opposition, 2 April 1931; CLA, National Committee Minutes of the Meeting of 12 June 1931, Box 35, Folder 5, GB Papers.

conference, an event which, in its totality, Spector would later denigrate as an “unedifying and somewhat disgraceful experience,” a “rotten compromise.” Cannon, who spoke only on Shachtman’s International Report, attacked Naville and pressed for the Bordigist Prometeo documents to be sent to the branches as a counter to Shachtman’s lack of attention to them. He offered, in Spector’s words, “a censorious and well-simulated fury,” warning the League’s conference of “the pit-falls of adopting a position on an international problem without adequate discussion.” Presented with the option of carrying their personalist animosity to Cannon into the League’s conference as a political issue when the more pressing political matters obviously related to international disputes in which it was difficult if not impossible to challenge their adversary, Shachtman, Spector, Abern, and Glotzer were backed into a particular cul-de-sac. Unity on the international question prevailed but, as Cannon understood, it did so under the cover of “a personal combination bound together by considerations of Friendship, mutual ‘Protection’, mutual grievances and appeals for sympathy.” He considered Glotzer and Abern prime examples of this turning of the League into a “friendship club ... for mutual aid.” Throughout the period January 1932 through to the June 1932 Plenum, the New York resident National Committee was embroiled in disputes over international issues, the drafting, rejection, and redrafting of documents on these questions becoming *pro forma*. Cannon would eventually urge CLA members to read Trotsky’s open letters on the German Left Opposition crisis, first circulated via the ILO’s *International Bulletin* in February 1931, suggesting that, “They would understand better the profound meaning of the inner conflict in the German section and the French section as well [through] ... these fearful examples where the clique spirit leads.” Private correspondence revealed both the political content of Shachtman’s European initiatives and the persistent cliquist rallying to defend him, which was often couched in *ad hominem* denigration of Cannon. Thus, when Glotzer wrote to Trotsky in May 1932, insisting that Shachtman was essentially non-aligned in the leadership disputes racking the French Ligue and compromising the ILO International Secretariat, he added, gratuitously: “A word on Cannon’s ‘internationalism’. I wouldn’t give a fig leaf for it. He is no more concerned about it than the man in the moon and what is more, knows even less about it.” Trotsky ignored the slight on Cannon, replying directly that, “Shachtman has never openly and honestly declared what he stands for, what he is fighting for, and with whom. He gave the Jewish Group in Paris the right to invoke his authority ... After two years of maneuvering by Shachtman, after dozens of admonishing letters from me, and continually evasive, petty diplomatic letters from Shachtman that always bordered on intrigue, I officially inquired of your leadership whether they support Shachtman’s international views.” Refusing to cultivate

illusions, Trotsky closed bluntly with the view that Shachtman's "character" was of a kind that, unfortunately, did not inspire confidence. On 19 May 1932, Trotsky wrote publicly to the CLA, congratulating it on taking a firm position on international questions, referring to "the false and damaging position of Comrade Shachtman on all the international questions, almost without exception."¹²³

There were, unfortunately for the International Left Opposition, other sorry indications of various dead-ends.¹²⁴ As factionalism internationalized it clarified for some in the CLA what was at stake in the politics of the American Left Opposition. Cannon seemed steeled in both his political revival and in the positions he came to elaborate over the 1931–32 years. With Cannon's increasing involvement in the affairs of the League, and with Rose Karsner and Arne Swabeck contributing greatly to putting the New York house of the CLA in order, Shachtman and Glotzer left the United States for Europe. Abern retreated into the New York branch and the safe, cliquish cocoon of his youth circle, a process of withdrawal that was, to be sure, given a push by the actions of Cannon and Swabeck. Spector hived himself off in Toronto where, admittedly, he made headway in winning to the Left Opposition the veteran Canadian communist, 'Moscow Jack' MacDonald, but where he also found himself embroiled in factional controversy fueled by a youth opposition to his leadership led by William Krehm. In what was undoubtedly an exaggerated statement that nevertheless captured something of relations in the Toronto Left Opposition, Krehm complained: "the whole activity of the Toronto branch was subordinated to the exi-

¹²³ *Dog Days*, 29; CLA, Minutes of the National Conference of the Communist League of America (Opposition), 24–27 September 1931; CLA, Minutes of the Plenum Meeting, National Committee, 24 September 1931, Box 35, Folder 5, GB Papers; Spector to Shachtman, 1 March 1932; 6 April 1932, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers; Glotzer to Shachtman, 22 May 1933, Roll 11, Reel 3354; Cannon, Speech Notes, "New York Branch – 1931," Reel 32, JPC Papers. The official account of the Second Conference of the CLA is silent on the subterranean currents of dispute. See Arne Swabeck, "Second National Conference Marks Step Forward," *The Militant*, 10 October 1931. Glotzer to Trotsky, 17 May 1932, quoted in *Dog Days*, 224; Trotsky to Glotzer, 3 June 1932, "Shachtman's Character," *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement 1, 1929–1933*, 118–119; Trotsky to CLA, 19 May 1932, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1932]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 98. Selected relevant details of the disputes and differences in the resident New York NC can be ascertained from motions and votes recorded in: CLA, National Committee Minutes, 13 January 1932; 3 February 1932; 17 February 1932; 15 March 1932; 18 April 1932, in Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers.

¹²⁴ Note, for instance, CLA, *Internal Bulletin*, No. 6 (15 January 1933), especially "Minutes of the International Secretariat," 15 December 1932, which deals with the Bordigist opposition to the Left Opposition's policy on the United Front; Number 8 (28 January 1933), which contains much on the German Opposition, wracked by capitulations to Stalinism.

gencies of Spector's legal studies. Group meetings were postponed or not called at all in order to accommodate [him] ... there was really no organized group." Spector considered those opposed to him little more than "a narrow, stifling ghetto element stewing in its own juice." He thought Krehm a non-entity heading "a little clique of thirty-seventh class pseudo-politicians," most of whom should not even be in the Left Opposition. As much as Spector denounced his critics for "not doing a stroke of work," it was also increasingly difficult to get the Toronto leader to contribute, not only to the functioning of the National Committee, but to his own faction's requests, be they about more involvement or writing articles for *The Militant*. Shachtman confided to Glotzer in April 1933 that Spector was "impossible to arouse from silence." He wrote in despair to the veteran Toronto Trotskyist, pleading with him to communicate: "Your silence up to now has caused all of our comrades – myself included – a great deal of perturbation and instead of knowing to what to attribute it, we are left pretty much to conjecture. Above all, it comes at a time when mutual consultation and the exchange of views is more urgently needed than usually." Spector finally responded, his demoralization evident in the first lines he wrote to Shachtman: "The Trotsky correspondence is a cold douche, *nicht war* [isn't it]. Clearly L.D. regards the now voluminous statements and memorials of both sides as a tempest in a teapot." Obviously tiring of the incessant battling, Spector was exhibiting signs of factional fatigue, seeing only the dispiriting prospects of an ongoing "protraction of the struggle."¹²⁵

Shachtman's and Glotzer's European circle, in turn, was dealt yet another blow. The hapless M. Mill, a.k.a. Jacques Obin, pseudonyms for the Ukrainian leader of the Parisian Jewish Group, Pavel Okun, had been parachuted

¹²⁵ The complicated Spector-Krehm antagonisms involved much that cannot be addressed here. The fullest treatment is unpublished, and relies on access to previously unavailable papers of Krehm: Wentzell, "Comrades and Scoundrels." For an introduction only see Bryan D. Palmer, "Maurice Spector, James Cannon, and the Origins of Canadian Trotskyism," *Labour/Le Travail*, 56 (Fall 2005), 133–135; William Krehm and All Members of the Majority, Toronto Branch, undated [June – July 1932?] and untitled Response to the Statement of the National Committee, Communist League of America, on the Toronto Branch, with thanks to Ian Angus for providing me with this document; Communist League of America, National Executive Committee, Minutes, 3 July 1931; 3 October 1931, Box 35, Folder 5; 3 April 1933, Attachment, "Resolution on Internal Situation, Toronto, February 1933," Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers; Spector to Shachtman, 6 April 1932; 27 April 1932; 23 June 1932, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers; Spector to Shachtman, October 1932; Shachtman to Spector, 3 January 1933, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers; Spector to Shachtman, 29 December 1932; Shachtman to Glotzer, 17 April 1933; Shachtman to Spector, 17 April 1933; 24 April 1933, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers.

into the International Secretariat because of his Russian language skills. He showed promise in the early French Ligue intrigues, in which he originally sided with Molinier against Naville and Rosmer. Both Shachtman and Glotzer crossed paths with Mill during their work in England in late 1931, at which point the émigré shifted factional gears and was linked to Naville. As we have seen, Mill published articles in *The Militant* that were subject to censure. He also clashed too many times with Trotsky to be assured of his place at the helm of the International Secretariat. Incapable of following a course of consistent political principle, and given to airs of authority and egocentrically disruptive behavior in the Parisian branch, Mill was eventually bounced from both the International Secretariat and the Ligue Communiste. His sinecure in the Left Opposition gone, Mill saw opportunities elsewhere and defected to Stalinism, securing employment inside the Soviet Union on the promise that he would procure Trotskyist documents and expose the plot against the socialist fatherland. When one of Cannon's young field operatives, Sam Gordon, inquired in November 1932 what was new on the international front, Cannon wrote back: "Well, here is the latest. Mill has gone over to the Stalinists, and is selling the secrets of the International Left Opposition, especially of the Russian section. If Shachtman had some of the qualities of a man, don't you think that instead of blackguarding us for our intervention on the international question, he would be grateful for the fact that we knocked him lose from Mill before it was too late?"¹²⁶

It was in this ubiquitous context of factional conflict that the CLA, over the course of 1931–32, stumbled from one tense internal conflict to the next. Whether the issue was the Carter Group and its anti-leadership stand in the New York branch, attempts to reconfigure the resident NC through co-optations, or Morgenstern's transgression in being married by a rabbi, the lines of antagonism had been drawn. But with the issues increasingly posed in terms of international questions, the authority of Trotsky in such matters being almost sacrosanct,¹²⁷ the Shachtman minority found itself increasingly weakened. Its

126 See Cannon to Gordon, 5 November 1932, Reel JPC Papers; Glotzer to Shachtman, 2 November 1932, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers; Leon Trotsky, "Mill as a Stalinist Agent," October 1932 and "The Lesson of Mill's Treachery," 13 October 1932, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky* [1932], 237–243; Heijenoort, *With Trotsky in Exile*, 96–97, 100. See also CLA, *Internal Bulletin*, Number 6 (15 January 1933).

127 See, for instance, CLA, *Internal Bulletin*, Number 9, especially Gourov [Trotsky], "On the Situation of the Left Opposition: A Letter to the Sections," 16 December 1932, also reprinted as Trotsky, "On the State of the Left Opposition," in *Writings of Leon Trotsky* [1932–1933], 24–36.

capacity to hold to its positions was eroded by “the Old Man’s” interventions. Few of these offered decisive resolutions, because they refused to countenance the bureaucratic impatience of Cannon and his majority, Trotsky often questioning the organizational heavy-handedness emanating from the New York resident National Committee. This gave Shachtman the ammunition he needed to keep the factional guns blazing.¹²⁸ But there was no denying that on the substantive political matters, Trotsky came down, time after time, against what he labeled the cliquist politics of conciliation that he believed animated Shachtman’s involvement in the European affairs of the Left Opposition.¹²⁹

This resonated perfectly with Cannon’s allegations against Shachtman, Glotzer, and Abern, and, ironically, it was borne out in their major June 1932 Plenum document, “Prospect and Retrospect,” as well as in their Plenum post-mortems. The constant theme reiterated in these and an outpouring of correspondence and corridor discussions on the part of the Shachtman Group was the insistence that, “The friction and lack of collective and efficient collaboration in the resident committee did not originate with the disputes over the international questions or the New York branch situation. They have their origin in differences and antagonisms existing in the committee for a long time.” This, of course, was shorthand for grievances that had accumulated as a consequence of Cannon’s partial withdrawal in 1929–30. As suggested above, more was at stake than a rational response to a leading comrade’s temporary demoralization. Indeed, it was the minority’s inability to bury the hatchet with respect to Cannon’s past problems and move on that was the biggest barrier to the Communist League of America’s advance in 1933. The point was unwittingly made by Glotzer in a letter to Shachtman in May 1933: “If your position or lack thereof of one in the past is to be made the barometer for deciding the internal situation here, then there will never be a solution to it.” The same, of course, could be said of Shachtman’s, Abern’s, Glotzer’s, and Spector’s clinging to a critique of Can-

128 See, for instance, the stubborn reiteration of factional position in Shachtman to Glotzer, 1 May 1933, Roll 11 Reel 3354, MS Papers.

129 Such cliquism seemed confirmed when, in April 1932, Cannon questioned Shachtman in a National Executive Committee meeting. “Question 1: Since your return from abroad have you conducted any correspondence relating to the internal controversies and affairs of the European sections or of the International Left Opposition as a whole with any of the leading comrades or groups in the European sections? Answer 1: Yes, a number of personal letters. Question 2: If so, will you furnish the N.C. with copies of their letters to you and your letters to them? Answer 2: No.” National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 11 April 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers.

non's work habits or lack thereof in the past. Thus, when the majority proposed to send Swabeck to Europe to engage in discussions with Trotsky, and to have Cannon take over the League's leading post as National Secretary, Shachtman and Company would have none of it, even though minority representatives had been to Prinkipo and elsewhere in Europe and Cannon had more than established that he was now out of his personal doldrums. An organized campaign was quickly mounted against Swabeck's transatlantic trip, and Cannon was, yet again, pilloried as a wastrel. Condemnation of "the Swabeck luxusreise" was cheaply bandied about, with Shachtman likening the trip to a Stalinist mission to Moscow: "Swabeck does not know that we are out of the Stalintern, and that Trotsky will not attempt to settle our internal dispute in Prinkipo, especially in the absence of a minority representative." Clandestine meetings were orchestrated ("Konikow was in town 'incognito' and we had several talks; I doubt if Boston will support Cannon") and, against Cannon taking over the National Secretary position, the most vehement language of hyperbolic denunciation of his past was summoned on to pages of correspondence:

the memory of that nightmarish period during which he occupied the post in question and kept his feet cocked on the desk while the organization collapsed, plus the more recent memories of his genteel abstention from any work that would soil his fingertips or entail the expenditure of more energy than is required to indite a document against the minority – these are too redolent of what Cannon in office means to the organization for us to have been blackjacked into acquiescence by his blusterings. ... To preserve Cannon's prestige for the movement, to enable him to function unmolested, we covered up the record of his boundless laziness, his criminal negligence of the tasks assigned to him, those petty factional digs and intrigues which he clothes so masterfully and brilliantly with the oral garments of 'principle'. ... He has forgotten that this is the Bolshevik-Leninist Opposition and not the good old days of the party. That is why we are now compelled from time to time to throw a beam of light upon dark spots and sewers. If they are filthy and stink, they are at least not of our creation.

To Antoinette Konikow in Boston, Shachtman merely denounced Cannon's character: incompetent, lazy, and callously indifferent to administrative affairs. He would not support Cannon in a paid National Secretary position "under any circumstances," claiming that the CLA could not "stand up under the burden of another \$170.00 a month disbursement." Resolutions flooded into the New York national office protesting sending the Danish-speaking Swabeck, a veteran of the American labor and communist movements whose experience reached

back to the 1919 Seattle General Strike and attendance at the Comintern's 1922 Congress, to Copenhagen, where Trotsky was scheduled to speak.¹³⁰

If Cannon and his supporters did not reply to this kind of opposition with the vehemence of their opponents, neither were they always restrained. Oehler ostensibly told John Edwards in Chicago that Shachtman, Glotzer, and Abern were an unprincipled faction aligned with any and all anti-Cannonists, regardless of principle. They were supposedly committed to "starv[ing] out of existence the comrades of the majority and particularly comrade Cannon." Oehler apparently verbally denounced this vindictive minority of petty-bourgeois origin, noting that it relied on their families and wives for material existence, adding that Shachtman, when he left the editorship of *The Militant*, occupied his time profitably, earning \$300.00 translating a book.¹³¹

Cannon was probably at his best when, outside of the New York branch and the resident NC, he could deal with young field operatives in a pedagogical, mentoring fashion. Thus, to Sam Gordon, he carefully explained the necessity of a certain course in a December 1932 letter. Describing the role of the minority advocate in Minneapolis, Carl Cowl, he wrote: "Cowl is a perfect prototype of those here in New York who are demonstrating at a critical moment in the life of the League that they are incapable of subordinating personal interests and aims to the interests and aims of the movement. It is not by accident that he is in the general combination which is fighting the NC without being able to advance any political reasons for it. We have to make it our aim to shake up the League, to see what it really consists of, put all questions sharply and clearly and leave no middle ground for neutrals and similar half-and-half elements." Against a relatively new Youngstown comrade named Koehler who opposed, in principle, sending an international delegate to Europe when "a factional struggle [was] going on in the organization," Cannon explained why this thinking was wrong-headed. "One could hardly find a cruder illustration than this statement provides of the way in which the minds of inexperienced comrades are debauched by the criminal demagoguery of the Shachtman-Carter clique. If Koehler had said that he is 'in principle' opposed to the League being **without** an international representative **at any time** when material circumstances make

130 Abern, Glotzer, and Shachtman, "Statement of the National Committee (Minority: The Results of the Plenum of the National Committee)," 29 June 1932, *Dog Days*, 316; Shachtman to Glotzer, 20 December 1932; Shachtman to Spector, 20 December 1932; Glotzer to Shachtman, 22 May 1933; Shachtman to Cowl, 1 January 1933; Shachtman to Glotzer, 2 January 1933; Shachtman to Spector, 3 January 1933; Shachtman to Konikow, 6 January 1933, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers.

131 Glotzer to Shachtman, 13 March 1932, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers.

it in any way possible, and that it is **especially necessary** to have this international representation during an internal crisis, one could say Koehler, despite his inexperience, is thinking like an internationalist and therefore has one of the first prerequisites for development into a vanguard Communist.”¹³²

To Vincent Ray Dunne, Cannon stressed the importance of sending to Europe a comrade of Swabeck's substance and selflessness, pointing out his history in the revolutionary movement and his recent material sacrifice for the League:

A mechanic accustomed to a wage of fifteen dollars a day, and he was able to make it steadily for he is a specially good mechanic, he came to work for the league for less than that much a week. ... since the Plenum he hasn't drawn any wages at all [and] for months before that he drew as little as three to five dollars per week – and still held on all this time. To make this possible he had to go into debt in all directions up to his ears, to rent out the best room in his house and turn the kitchen into a bedroom, to send his wife out to work as a servant in other people's houses to provide the food minimum while he does the housework and cooking for the boy. ... It is remarkable how little this sterling example of responsibility and capacity for sacrifice impresses some people, especially in New York, who have yet to learn by experience what it means to be a revolutionist in the way of sacrifice. They talk about Swabecks as though Swabecks grew on bushes for any fool with a stick to knock down. Shachtman is the inspirer of this thoroughly rotten tendency. It was he who set in motion the theory about the 'degeneration' of the 'old guard' and blinded the young comrades to the importance of past records and present performances on the part of those who had passed the 'age limit'. Well, we can be sure this diseased sentiment will not have any lasting influence.

Gordon wrote to Cannon from Pittsburgh on 6 January 1933, pleased to hear that with the financial pledges of Minneapolis comrades and individual loans taken out by others in the Cannon camp, Swabeck was ready to leave for Europe. Cannon himself was delighted when he received word from the International Secretariat on 15 December 1932 that it was calling for a preliminary conference of the ILO and that a delegate from the United States was most wanted. This, in his view, vindicated the NC majority's decision to send Swabeck to see Trotsky. He later wrote to Carl Skoglund in Minneapolis, pointing out that

132 Cannon to Gordon, 20 December 1932, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

the German Left Opposition was experiencing upheavals and capitulations to Stalinism, stressing the necessity of putting “political considerations” first, and addressing the importance of the Swabeck trip and its meaning to the CLA: “Things are developing rapidly in Europe. On the one hand, the selection of the central cadre is proceeding rapidly, on the other, elements who cannot keep step are being sloughed off. The lesson of principled politics in the internal life of the League and the selection of its basic cadres is becoming the outstanding lesson of the experience in the last three years. We have sent our delegate across just at the right time, thanks to the prompt and sacrificial responses of the Bolsheviks, who know what they want and do what is necessary to get it, pushing aside the oppositions and the opposers.”¹³³

11 International Intervention

Swabeck quickly ascertained from Left Opposition forces in Paris that the CLA majority views were favorably regarded in Europe and that there was suspicion, rooted in the experience of the French Ligue, of unprincipled personal combinations. The International preconference of the ILO provided him with an opportunity to present a report on political and economic developments in the United States, and to outline the nature of the internal crisis within the CLA. A preconference resolution relating to the Communist League of America highlighting the progress made in the America League passed, approving in general the leadership decisions within the League’s National Committee, and established that a full discussion of the internal disputes wracking the American section was to take place at a future national conference. It further suggested that all sections of the ILO would be involved in addressing the CLA’s internal questions, but that they needed to be better informed.

Traveling to Prinkipo, engaging in conversations with Trotsky, and accessing the correspondence to him from Shachtman, Glotzer, and others, Swabeck was also aware of how he and Cannon had been represented by their comrades. As he wrote to Cannon, in March 1933, “The numerous letters which are on file here, the personal letters from Max and Al, really defy description as to their content. They contain no effort of moderation, neither in tone nor in content. As a matter of fact in that respect they are much worse than anyone could

¹³³ Gordon to Cannon, 6 January 1933; Cannon to Skoglund, 2 February 1933; and for Cannon’s full discussion of developments within the International Secretariat that confirmed the validity of sending Swabeck to Europe, Cannon to Vincent Ray Dunne, 1 January 1933, all in Reel 3, JPC Papers.

expect.” Trotsky, Swabeck assured Cannon, did not take the outrageousness of the allegations seriously, but he was firm, as we have seen, in his conviction that the majority needed to moderate its “formal intransigence which may appear as bureaucratism and which in any case will bring to the authority of the central committee and to its influence, rather injury than advantage.” Trotsky, as Swabeck conveyed to Cannon, was, in his role as International Left Opposition guardian, impressing on the majority in the American section the need for it to behave responsibly, and to fulfill its leadership functions. Nothing would be worse, Trotsky suggested, than a premature, incomprehensible split in the CLA, a fracturing of the forces of the Left Opposition in the United States that would not be understood among communist workers as flowing from principled political positions of difference. Swabeck wrote to Cannon that Trotsky “looks upon our group as the responsible leading group and says so quite frankly that is what we are but we must live up to it. In view of this he is much more critical of us, that is much more critical of what mistakes we make. He demands more from us. He particularly demands modifications and concessions on our part which will serve as measures to avoid a split direction. He says the majority is the section to give concessions.” Such conciliation, Swabeck stressed in conclusion, was only to apply to “organizational measures affecting internal relations,” as opposed to matters relating to the political direction of the CLA.

Cannon passed on Trotsky’s criticisms to his supporters in the CLA, acknowledging that they demanded serious consideration and warranted “modifications in our organization policy.” He nonetheless retained his distaste for the “corrupt petty-bourgeois political methods of the Shachtman clique,” insisting that in terms of political concessions – “we give nothing.” As Cannon shifted gears under pressure from Trotsky, it was nonetheless difficult to overcome the bitterness that gnawed away at him during what he felt was a personalized attack on his leadership. Cannon supporter and close friend of Sam Gordon, Jack Carmody, described a conversation he had over a few beers in which Jim appeared to take lightly news of what Joseph Carter and the New York branch were up to, but nonetheless bristled when the subject of a “Cannon group” came up. “If the branch repudiates the Cannon group ‘I’m through,’” Cannon reportedly huffed.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ The above paragraphs draw on Swabeck to Cannon, 24 January 1933; 15 February 1933; 5 March 1933; 8 March 1933 (containing the enclosure, Trotsky to Swabeck, 7 March 1933, “Strictly Personal”); Swabeck to Trotsky, 8 March 1933, all in Reel 3, JPC Papers. For many of the relevant documents see as well *Dog Days*: “Resolution on the Situation in the American Section, International Preconference of the ILO, 4–8 February 1933,” 455–456; Discussion between Trotsky and Swabeck, “The International Must Apply the Brakes,” 27 February

Just as Cannon and Swabeck were being tutored in the need to refrain from organizational heavy-handedness by Trotsky, a like message of the necessity of not recklessly exacerbating tensions was being conveyed to Shachtman and Glotzer. They began to appreciate the importance of moderating their antagonism to the Cannon leadership through more selectively choosing the ground on which to fight for their positions. Trotsky informed Shachtman in March 1933 that, "The situation in the League is currently our biggest worry here. You are moving toward a split there, and that will mean a catastrophe for the League. ... A decisive intervention on the part of the International Secretariat is necessary." Trotsky's brusque condemnation of the Shachtman-led "protest campaign against delegating comrade Swabeck" to travel to Europe concluded with a plea "not to be too nervous, too impatient, but to ... not forget for a moment that we have an international organization that is by no means inclined to being one-sided." Shachtman was warned directly that, "the 'attacker', the rabble-rouser, has much more to lose than to win."

This communication did not fall on deaf ears. Spector wrote to Shachtman: "Our 'campaign', I am afraid, against the Swabeck trip ... did not add to our prestige. I voted for and induced the branch to support your views, but my enthusiasm was a bit damp. We must learn to select our terrain." Shachtman would eventually concede that, "our opposition to Swabeck's leaving for Europe ... was neither well formulated nor well founded, and it is necessary to acknowledge that frankly." After Shachtman traveled to Europe to attend, along with Swabeck, the ILO May 1933 Plenum in Paris where the internal dispute in the American League was discussed, the CLA minority backed away from some issues. It lessened its intransigent defensiveness with respect to Joseph Carter and his small contingent of anti-Cannon supporters in the New York branch. "As for the Carter question," Shachtman wrote to Abern from Turkey, "I am now fairly persuaded that we made an error in our conduct towards it. ... I shall henceforth think four times before allowing myself to be dragged in to another campaign to make an international question out of a 'group' of that caliber and dimension."

1933; Trotsky to International Secretariat, "On the Situation in the American League," 7 March 1933, 467-472; Trotsky to Swabeck, "The Majority Has No Right to Impatience," 7 March 1933, 472-473; Swabeck to Trotsky, "I Accept Your Criticisms," 474-477; Swabeck to Cannon, "Trotsky Expects More of Us," 8 March 1933, 478-487; Cannon to Comrades, "We Have Made Some Errors," 27 March 1933, 492-493; "Concession on Organizational Questions," 5 April 1933, 495-496; Glotzer to Shachtman, "Foolish and Petty Actions Did not Help Us," 23 May 1933, 536-542; Shachtman to Glotzer, 1 May 1933; Carmody to Gordon [Wednesday, no date], Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers.

As Trotsky pressed Shachtman to use all of his influence to lessen the poisoned atmosphere in the League, insisting that he stood with neither the majority nor the minority but that he was deeply concerned over the prospects of an imminent split, the logic of his approach came to be accepted. Shachtman was counseled by Trotsky to “retreat in order to better leap forward!” He suggested that if Shachtman and his supporters had indeed drawn an appropriate assessment of Cannon, all they need do was wait and their negative evaluation would be confirmed. The ILO would then support them, as long as they were correct and tried genuinely to work in a comradely way with the majority. Trotsky’s final suggestion, however, was a fairly transparent indication that he understood well what was at stake in the CLA’s factional impasse. “The atmosphere in the League is thoroughly poisoned,” Trotsky stated unequivocally. “I propose that anybody in the League who makes personal attacks upon a comrade should be immediately expelled. This applies to both sides, of course.” He even called on the minority to make a decisive statement by taking the lead and turfing any of its supporters who violated the call for a metaphorical ceasefire: “if anyone henceforward continues to poison the League atmosphere by personal slanders and attacks and provocations, expel him immediately!” This advice Shachtman regarded as “extremely harsh,” but he felt compelled to move in directions that would clear the League air of “personal” recriminations, putting all discussions on a more thoroughly political footing. “Then those who in the midst of such discussion try to recharge the old atmosphere with its old fumes will not have a leg to stand on, either in the League or in our international.” Trotsky, playing King Solomon to the claimant birth mothers of the Communist League of America, gambled all on both the majority and the minority not wanting to tear their organizational child apart in further factional warfare. In conjunction with the authority of the International Left Opposition, he laid the foundation for a new order in the American section. His efforts, not entirely successful immediately, were to moderate the *political* impatience and distrust of Shachtman, Abern, Glotzer, and Spector, just as he pushed to curb the *organizational* impatience and distrust of Cannon and Swabeck.¹³⁵

135 The above paragraphs draw on Trotsky to Shachtman, “You Were Wrong to Campaign Against Swabeck’s Trip,” 8 March 1933, *Dog Days*, 477–478; and, for a similar letter, Trotsky to Glotzer, “A Split Would be a Catastrophe,” 14 March 1933, 488–489; Spector to Shachtman, 24 April 1933, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers. Spector was clearly backtracking on the Swabeck trip to Europe, revising his position in light of Trotsky’s criticisms. For he had indeed opposed the trip, writing to Cannon as National Secretary with a series of objections. See Cannon to Spector, 17 February 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers. Shachtman’s backtracking on defense of Carter is in Shachtman to Abern, 22 June 1933, Roll 3, Reel 3346, MS

Old resentments died hard, and loyalties lost and trusts betrayed were not, at the stroke of Trotsky's pen, forgotten and forgiven. Cannon wrote to Swabeck in Turkey in February 1933 that, in spite of efforts to put the League on a new course, this initiative was met with "the most violent factional struggle against it. ... The factional struggle against the National Committee has flared up again more fiercely than ever and has taken on even more venomous personal forms even than you were about to witness before your departure. And this takes place under conditions when nobody finds anything wrong with the policy of the [National] Committee or brings forward any 'political differences' with regard to our course in general or the specific campaign in particular." Cannon's involvement in agitational mass work, especially in the Illinois coalfields among the Progressive Miners of America [PMA] and in a reviving labor defense mobilization on behalf of Tom Mooney spearheaded by the Communist Party's International Labor Defense organization, all of which will be detailed in the next chapter, elicited considerable obstruction on the part of Shachtman and others.

This unfolded at the interface of personal/political critique, to be sure, but it did so in ways far more expressive of personal animosities than of principled political differences. At loggerheads in the resident National Committee, Cannon tried to placate Shachtman with an April resolution providing that a series of disputes in the organizational realm would, if disagreement prevailed in the NC, be subject to ratification by the International Secretariat. He then proposed that he and Oehler embark on a speaking tour throughout the mid-west, culminating in Cannon's spending time among the Illinois miners, promoting the CLA work within the PMA, at the same time that Shachtman undertake a lecture circuit of the eastern branches and, following Cannon's return, an agitational swing through the west. In their absence, Abern was to assume the role of Acting Secretary in the national office. This eminently reasonable (and decidedly non-factional) suggestion was blocked by Shachtman. He took the opportunity to (rightly) demand that Abern, whose vote on the resident NC had been rescinded, be restored to his status as a full member of the National Committee, but he wrongly followed this with motions that Shachtman alone tour and be solely responsible for speaking engagements and other work, concentrating on propagandizing around the situation in the USSR and the crisis in Germany. Shachtman also proposed that he speak in the Illinois coalfields, but this work was clearly relegated to a secondary consideration. Given that, as we shall see in

Papers. For Trotsky's advice to Shachtman see *Dog Days*, Shachtman to Comrades, "We Must Call a Retreat," 9 June 1933, 543–551.

the next chapter, the League's important work within the PMA was at a critical juncture, necessitating serious and effective intervention, Shachtman's motion, guided by ongoing factional animosities, would have effectively sabotaged the CLA in the Illinois mining districts.

Shachtman was nowhere near Cannon's equal with respect to the authority he commanded in the mining sector. Cannon had the evident capacity, as Trotsky later chided Shachtman, to influence the mining constituency, and yet Shachtman's resolution would have tied Cannon to his New York NC desk, fiddling with administrative matters while the PMA-CLA connection in Illinois burned. As figures such as Glotzer recognized, Cannon's stature as a riveting speaker before working-class audiences stood the League in good stead among militants and advanced the prospects for Left Opposition ideas in working-class circles. Yet, as Cannon pointed out to Swabeck, his trip throughout the Illinois minefields, as well as subsequent return-home stops in Chicago, Cleveland, and Buffalo, however much they resulted in gains and new branches organized for the League "did not in the least moderate the internal antagonisms."

Glotzer, at least, toned down his factional hostility. He judged Cannon entirely negatively in November 1932, writing to Shachtman: "I can see no worse fate for Cannon, than to make him assume his responsibilities in the organization as every other member. But I doubt even then, that he would **learn!** The Hindu untouchables can take a lesson from Elmer Gantry." Three months later, following Jim's trip to Chicago via Gillespie, he sang an entirely more positive tune, albeit not without some discordant, factional notes:

I must declare, that I met a new Jim, if only for that night. ... He was very cordial!?! The narrative: We did not quite understand the situation in Illinois. We were too far away to really grasp the significance of the mass movement and have lost valuable time. There are great possibilities for our movement if we concentrate our forces in the field. The coal situation may be the means to open up a new stage in the development of the American League. It will help us break from our shell of isolation and get into some mass work. The organization has been stagnating somewhat (!) and we have an opportunity now to do some real class struggle work. We must take advantage of the situation ... The whole League must be mobilized for a big campaign of the Left Opposition in the coal fields. Retreat is impossible. We cannot afford to retrench. ... He was enthused or at least appeared that way. This was the first time I heard him speak in this fashion for at least four years. And I am sure that Swabeck would have been the most discomforted man to have heard the remarks he made. I must

say, that for the moment I thought one of us were speaking. He explained that four years of working on a lousy job warps one's perspective and prevents him from seeing straight, or words to that effect, and that now he has gotten out into activity and made contact with masses of workers he has a new slant on things and wants above all work and work and work.

In May of 1933, Glotzer was even more enthusiastic after Cannon's participation in the Chicago Free Mooney Congress: "Cannon's presence ... was a great help to us. This must be acknowledged and it appears to me that objections raised to his going was not very smart, nor also, to his return to the Illinois coal fields."¹³⁶ The dog days were finally showing signs of coming to an end.

Shachtman resisted for a time. As late as 17 April 1933 he was writing to Glotzer that "L.D.'s letter is of course deliberately ambiguous on many respects. If he means what I hope he means, well and good. If he has the idea that it is possible for us to suspend the fight against Cannon's policies and methods in the League, I'm afraid he'll have to count me out of his calculations. I didn't start the fight as a pastime to be dropped at a signal."¹³⁷ One expression of this resilient animosity was the final factional flurry that accompanied resistance to Cannon's revived political activity among the Illinois miners and within the Mooney labor defense campaign. At precisely the same time that Shachtman was pillorying Cannon and Swabeck for their ostensible trade union opportunism, he unleashed a volley of criticism directed at Cannon's apparent adventurism on the international front.¹³⁸ The issue involved the role that the

¹³⁶ The above paragraphs draw on material in CLA, National Committee Minutes, 5 April 1933; 7 April 1933, and attachments detail the resolutions and issues relating to CLA-PMA matters, all material in Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers (also in *Dog Days*, 495–498); Cannon to Swabeck, 11 February 1933, Reel 2, JPC Papers; Glotzer to Shachtman, 2 November 1932; Glotzer to Shachtman and Abern, 6 February 1933; 22 May 1933, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers. For a brief introduction to the PMA and the CLA see *Dog Days*, 62–70, and for Shachtman's critique of Cannon's work among miners and other related issues see Shachtman, "Motion on the Illinois Mining Campaign," 24 February 1933, *Dog Days*, 429–434. See also Stanton and Taber, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 190–213. Trotsky's response to all of this is in Trotsky to the International Secretariat, "More on the American Dispute," 17 April 1933, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1932–1933]*, 203–205, where Trotsky expresses agreement with the Cannon majority's restoration of Abern's National Committee vote but finds the minority response disquieting.

¹³⁷ Shachtman to Glotzer, 17 April 1933, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers.

¹³⁸ Note the flurry of Shachtman correspondence of 3 March 1933, to Glotzer, Sara Cowl, Joseph Angelo, copied to Spector, all in Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers, which accents Cannon and the miners and the Red Army issue.

Red Army might play in the increasingly threatening rise to power of Adolf Hitler in Germany.

The ILO and the CLA stressed repeatedly, over the course of 1930–32, the urgent need for united front actions to derail the fascist juggernaut. By 1933, with Hitler confirmed as Chancellor, the American League and its paper, *The Militant*, propagandized relentlessly around the need to mobilize a resolute opposition to the fascist forces in Germany. The front page of the 4 February 1933 issue of *The Militant* was headlined “Hitler In Power; Civil War Starts – Opposition’s Demand for a United Front is Need of the Hour in Germany,” while the bottom of the page announced a Second Avenue, New York, Stuyvesant Casino Sunday night, 5 February mass meeting, sponsored by the CLA, with Cannon and Shachtman speaking on “The Crisis in Germany.” That gathering drew an audience of 500, which heard Cannon and Shachtman appeal to the Communist Party, USA, to begin to organize massive united front demonstrations protesting fascism’s consolidation and supporting the beleaguered German working class. All but six of the hundreds in attendance at the Stuyvesant Casino endorsed with enthusiasm a resolution declaring, in part, the need for the return to the Soviet Union of exiled Bolshevik leaders such as Leon Trotsky and Christian Rakovsky.

A week later Cannon addressed a similar mass meeting at the Hollywood Gardens in the Bronx. He also attended public Party meetings and spoke from the floor, as well as traveling to Philadelphia and other adjacent centers to speak. The CLA was, at the same time, actively engaged in making widely available its pamphlet version of Trotsky’s *Germany – What Next? The Militant* upped its publication schedule to three times a week during “the German crisis,” halving the page count per issue. Sales of the paper soared. In late February 1933, the CLA claimed that it sold 1,000 copies of *The Militant* in New York on a single day. From Chicago and other locales came complaints that copies of the Left Opposition press, at 535 issues per delivery, were in short supply. Two hundred more would be sold if only the Windy City could get its hands on extra bundles of *Militants*. Under the headline “No Retreat! Struggle or Annihilation!” Shachtman called on all progressive forces to make haste in the battle against fascism. League speakers such as Abern and Oehler addressed audiences from Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania to Des Moines, Iowa on the necessity of rallying all possible supporters to stop Hitler. “Fascists Command Police; Shoot the Reds!” and “Whoever Blocks the Workers’ United Front is a Traitor!” screamed *Militant* headlines. Throughout February and March, Cannon and Shachtman were speaking almost weekly at a variety of New York venues on topics relating to German developments, accenting fascism’s barbarity, the bloodthirsty repression of militant workers and communists, and Stalinism’s bankrupt policies,

the isolating so-called “united front from below” failing to galvanize workers to the solidarity and common front needed to defeat Hitler. **“Why is the Comintern Silent on Germany?”** shouted the bold, large font headlines of *The Militant*.

By the end of March 1933, the pressure mounted by the Left Opposition as well as the deadening toll registered in Hitler’s victories and the German working class’s ongoing defeats, seemed to prod the Communist International towards at least a half-hearted turn to the politics of the united front. But this development arguably ended up of less significance within the factional hot-house of the Communist League of America (Opposition) than an ostensible miscue by Cannon, one that would be grist for Shachtman’s inimical mill. As Cannon’s surviving speech notes indicate, when he addressed audiences about the German crisis he highlighted the necessity of united front action, stressing that it was crucial that all the forces of the international proletariat must be readied to take their stand against fascism and in defense of the German working class, understanding that Hitler’s triumph would make inevitable an attack on the Soviet Union. “The Red Army must be made ready,” his notes declared, although in another speech Cannon apparently posed the question with less caution: “Russia must mobilize the Red Army and be ready to strike the first blow.”¹³⁹

Shachtman subsequently claimed that in his first two speeches on the German crisis Cannon had actually “advocated at the mass meetings the perfectly amazing slogan of sending the [Red Army] into Germany **now**. 1,000 people

139 The above paragraphs draw on *The Militant*, 4 February 1933; 11 February 1933; 15 February 1933; 22 February 1933; 1 March 1933; 3 March 1933; 6 March 1933; 10 March 1933; 18 March 1933; 25 March 1933; 1 April 1933; 29 April 1933. Each of these cited issues of *The Militant* contains multiple articles on Germany and fascism’s destructive consequences. This campaign against fascism would of course continue to occupy space in the CLA newspaper in later issues. See also Cannon, Rough Notes, “Speech on Germany,” New York, 10 March 1933 and Cannon, Rough Notes, “Fascism (Mass Meeting), Manhattan Lyceum, 1/5/33,” Reel 33, JPC Papers; James P. Cannon To All Branches, “German Campaign – Circular #2,” *The Militant*, 14 February 1933; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 106–108; CLA, National Committee Minutes, 3 April 1933, Attachment, Martin Abern, “Report of Activity During the period of the Three-Times-a-Week Militant in New German Campaign,” Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers. The suggestion of a Communist International turn to the united front opposition to fascism that had been championed by the International Left Opposition was not, of course, realized in 1933. See “The Paris Anti-Fascist Congress ... an anti-Trotskyist Slug Fest,” *The Militant*, 1 July 1933; “C.I. Impotence Veils Itself with Parliamentary Cretinism,” *The Militant*, 8 July 1933; Leon Trotsky, “After the German Catastrophe: An Historical Evaluation,” *The Militant*, 15 July 1933.

heard it; both Stalinists and Lovestoneites have launched a campaign against us." Stressing that it was impossible to counter the howls from opponents, on the grounds that Cannon had recklessly called on the Soviet Union to wage war on Germany, Shachtman insisted that the impromptu speech comment "demanded a correction immediately." He noted that Cannon "now denies having issued" such a statement, but "every member of the branch heard him!" Cannon, Shachtman claimed, was now engaged in an "infamous" cover-up, opposing resolutions in the National Committee with his own motions, challenging the League not to bend the knee to Stalinist demagoguery.

In Cannon's view, Shachtman's protest tailed the Stalinist campaign of inciting hatred against the Left Opposition for daring to suggest that the Red Army had a role to play in the international class struggle: "The doctrine of socialism in one country has wrought a fearful havoc on the brains of those who stand before the communist proletariat in the capacity of official leaders." He also insisted that neither Shachtman nor any other member of the League present at the meetings where Cannon raised the issue of the Red Army, questioned any statements that he made, or advised him, after his first speech, that he needed to modify anything he said. Indeed, in an extremely detailed four-page report on CLA activities during the German campaign, where comment on the mass meetings addressed by Cannon and Shachtman was addressed explicitly and in entirely positive ways, Martin Abern never so much as mentioned a concern with Cannon's comments on the Red Army. Abern reserved his factional ire for the Cannonist Tom Stamm's refusal to furnish literature from the offices of the League's publisher, Pioneer Press, on the spurious grounds that the New York branch was in financial arrears. Neither does Cannon's private correspondence immediately following the forums on "the German crisis" convey any sense that his speeches were at all controversial.

Thus, in reports to Swabeck, where he would almost certainly have raised the issue of Shachtman criticizing his speech in any way, Cannon waxed enthusiastic about the League's German campaign:

Our bold steps have thrown the Stalinists into a panic and the LO is on the offensive everywhere. Our mass meeting in the Bronx last Sunday, the first indoor meeting we ever held there, was packed to the doors. Close to 500 were present – the majority of them party members and sympathizers of the party. The answering of questions lasted until one o'clock in the morning. The whole affair was a political triumph for us. Similarly with my meeting in Philadelphia last week – the largest meeting the LO has ever held there. Tomorrow night we invade Brooklyn with a mass meeting.

A week later Cannon was no less upbeat, his optimism getting the better of him with respect to both the unity in the Left Opposition *and* the Party doors that he perceived opening:

I just returned from a Bronx meeting of the party on the German situation with H.M. Wicks as the speaker of the day. When the Party members spoke at our Bronx meeting we baited them to allow us the same privilege at their meeting. They could not conveniently refuse under the circumstances and promised that we should have the floor. We went today to claim it. For the first time in four and a half years Max and I spoke to a Party meeting **under party auspices**. As a result the whole discussion and the summing up ... revolved exclusively around the standpoint of the Left Opposition. It was an interesting time. After us, Clarke and Petras spoke – four Oppositionists all together. Our German campaign is shaking up the party and breaking down many of the barriers between us and Party members. Thanks to this, on top of what has gone on before, they are now more willing to listen to us. In a certain way, and to a certain degree, we are regaining our Party rights. That is what the affair this afternoon signified to us – even if in a very limited sense.

Cannon may have been right, in a thoroughly temporary sense, about making some headway in Party circles, but he was wrong, of course, about the capacities of Stalinism to be more open to the Left Opposition. The brief interlude of exchange between the Left Opposition and the Communist Party obviously threatened the Stalinist leadership more than it convinced the anti-Trotskyist stalwarts of the need for united front activities. It did not take long for the *Daily Worker* and leading Party officials to unleash the hounds of hyperbole on Cannon, denouncing his call for the Red Army to be mobilized in the anti-fascist cause as well as his (and the Left Opposition's) increasing presence in the unemployed and trade union movements.

As the Stalinist crescendo of critique peaked, Shachtman moved to repudiate what he considered Cannon's ill-advised view that, "The knife of fascism is poised over the body of the German working class and the Red Army must be mobilized to shoot this knife out of its hand." Both Cannon and Shachtman ostensibly agreed that the Red Army was "the army of the international revolutionary proletariat," but in a resolution introduced at the 24 February 1933 resident National Committee meeting, Shachtman struck a blow at his construction of Cannon's position. He declared, "The International Left Opposition ... does not now raise the demand that *at the present time*, in the situation as it is *today*, with the *present* relationship of forces, the Red Army is to be mobilized for the

purpose of ‘marching on Germany’ now.” Cannon countered that it was not necessary to deny that the Left Opposition called for an immediate Red Army “march to Germany.” He instead defended the fundamental position that it was imperative to call for the international working class, the Soviet Union, and the Red Army to prepare for the inevitable war that Hitler had already initiated with his repeated blows against the German working class. Most pointedly, in direct response to Shachtman, Cannon declared forcefully: “The statement of comrade Shachtman that, at the meeting at the Stuyvesant Casino on 5 February ‘Cannon in his speech raised the slogan of mobilizing the Red Army to intervene immediately in Germany’ is a lie invented after the fact, or, more correctly, borrowed from the Stalinists after he and others associated with him had felt the full force of the Stalinist pogrom agitation.” This smacked to Cannon of “the organized system of lying which has characterized the factional method of Shachtman since the beginning of the internal struggle and by means of which he has sought at every turn to muddle and divert attention from the real issue in dispute.”¹⁴⁰

Trotsky, well aware that relations within the CLA were fragile but had taken a step back from the intransigent factional impasse of the 1930–33 years, moved decisively to squelch the Red Army imbroglio. He undoubtedly saw in the controversy, which dragged on for a month, further evidence, if he needed any, of the two-sided nature of the prison house of antagonism that the CLA’s National Committee had become. Shachtman’s almost scholastic pounce upon a Cannonesque rhetorical flourish was followed by Cannon’s repudiation and denunciation, and the demand that an airing of the dispute take place in the pages of *The Militant*. Upping the ante, Shachtman relied, yet again, on the New York branch, not known for its support for Cannon, to “designate his present denial of his own slogan as nothing but a *falsehood*.”

Trotsky, in principle, had no great criticism of Cannon’s political position, especially given that Cannon denied that he had ever called for the *immediate* march of the Red Army on Germany. Swabeck, writing from Turkey, assured

140 The above paragraphs draw on Shachtman to Glotzer, 3 March 1933, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers; CLA, National Committee Minutes, 3 April 1933, Attachment, Martin Abern, “Report of Activity during the Three-Times-A-Week Militant in the German Campaign,” Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers; Cannon to Swabeck, 11 February 1933; 19 February 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Shachtman to Trotsky, 3 March 1933, quoted in Shachtman, “Motion on the Situation in Germany and the Role of the Red Army,” 20 February 1933; Cannon, “The Red Army and the German Revolution,” 24 February 1933; Shachtman, “Statement on the Dispute over the Red Army and the German Situation,” 12 March 1933; Cannon, “Note on Shachtman’s Statement,” 18 March 1933, all in *Dog Days*, 421–448; CLA, *Internal Bulletin*, Number 10 (18 March 1933).

Cannon that this was the case. Indeed, Trotsky and Cannon had fundamentally the same view of the Red Army, which existed “to aid revolution of the German workers, even to aid them to **commence** revolution.” But, Trotsky cautioned, in throwing a tactical bone to Shachtman and his minority, Stalinism had so weakened the capacities of the German working class to resist fascism’s march to power and so paralyzed the Russian workers state that a demand to mobilize the Red Army for an immediate German intervention “would be sheer adventurism.” The task, for all Left Oppositionists, was thus to call relentlessly for united front actions that could strengthen all forces of anti-fascist resistance, in particular “the consolidation of the Proletarian Dictatorship and the active role of the Red Army,” which entailed “an *unmerciful criticism of the Stalinist bureaucracy which in the decisive hour* paralyzes the workers’ state.” In light of Trotsky’s advice, Cannon withdrew his submitted statement on the dispute from *The Militant* declaring that information “about the internal condition of the Red Army, which directly affects its *capacity* to fulfill its proper role in the present circumstances, places an extraordinary restriction on public utterances on the question.” The National Committee meeting of 18 March 1933 saw the clash over the Red Army finally put to rest. With Cannon and Shachtman the only voting resident NC members present when contradictory resolutions were moved against one another, the situation was an almost laughable stand-off, but in the end the controversy dissipated.¹⁴¹

As if to punctuate his message with a private exclamation mark, Trotsky wrote to Shachtman not to have any “illusions on the question of the distribution of sympathies in Europe: ... all of our sections will tend to support the Cannon group. ... when decisive political questions have not yet come to the fore, your group will, in the eyes of all of our sections, have to shoulder the responsibility for a possible split as well as for the drawn-out internal struggle.

141 The above paragraphs draw on Gourov [Trotsky], “Germany and the USSR,” CLA, *Internal Bulletin*, Number 11 (31 March 1933), also in *Dog Days*, 489–491, which also contains Shachtman’s comments on the New York comrades (438) and Cannon’s statement on withdrawing his Red Army article from *The Militant* (448). Swabeck to Cannon, 18 March 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers placed an accent on Trotsky’s confirming Cannon’s principled position but raising “the tactical problem of the role which the red army should play, but which it cannot now play because of the catastrophic situation in the USSR. This latter fact naturally has not been sufficiently known to our comrades in general.” The New York Branch, with Abern as Temporary Organizer, remained an irksome critic of the National Committee. See Abern to Cannon, 26 March 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers. On the resident NC meeting see CLA, National Committee Minutes, 18 March 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers, which reveal Cannon and Shachtman voting against each other’s motions and digging in their respective heels. Note, in light of Cannon’s withdrawal of his article, Trotsky, “Hitler and the Red Army,” *The Militant*, 8 April 1933.

Without wanting to, you carry a certain heavy political legacy around with you in Europe: Every group we have had to combat here has invoked Shachtman, and for all sections your name has become symbolic in this regard." Finally, Trotsky emphasized that in trade union questions, which were coming to be of decisive importance and about which more will be said in the next chapter, Shachtman evidenced only formalistic and factional positions. Here there was no mistaking Cannon's authority: "The point is not to unfurl our 'flag' in the trade unions once or twice, and perhaps precisely for this reason to disappear from them, but rather to gradually win points of support through which we will gain the possibility of unfurling our flag fully. The fact that you wanted to prevent Cannon's recent trip to Illinois seems to me completely wrong, even from the standpoint of your factional struggle."¹⁴²

Underscoring Trotsky's advice were new developments of momentous significance. They would expand the possibilities for Cannon, Shachtman, and the Communist League of America to intervene directly in the class struggle in the United States, and to further propagate the views of the Left Opposition.

12 Dog Days Denouement: New Turns

As the winter of 1933 gave way to spring, summer, and then fall, the Communist League of America rode parallel waves of development. On the one hand, the International Left Opposition, under pressure of the Comintern's failures and fascism's deadly threats, and guided by Trotsky's growing frustrations and impatience with functioning as an external faction of the Communist International, adopted an entirely new course. It was one that ended its frustrating orientation as an external faction of the Communist International and called instead for the formation of new communist parties and a decisive break from Stalinism, not only politically, but also organizationally.¹⁴³ On the other hand, within the United States new opportunities both presented themselves and offered the prospects of actually reconstituting the life of the Left Opposi-

¹⁴² Trotsky to Shachtman, "The European Sections will Not Support You," 1 May 1933 and Trotsky, "Trade Union Problems in America," 23 September 1933, *Dog Days*, 529–530, 591–593.

¹⁴³ The International Secretariat issued letters from Gourov (Trotsky) in September 1933 announcing a decisive break "with the Stalinist organizations," and the need to form a New International, prompting an immediate, wide, and positive discussion within the Communist League of America, which endorsed the proposed shift in orientation. See Cannon to International Secretariat, 11 September 1933; Cannon to All Branches, 12 September 1933; Cannon to All Branches, 16 September 1933; Cannon to All Branches (Program of Action Circular), Box 49, Folder 7, "Cannon Correspondence," Houghton Library, GB Papers.

tion. *The Militant* heralded the new turn as fall dawned in 1933, a front-page declaration of the Communist League of America (Opposition) opening the columns of the paper to a "discussion of the question of a new party and a new International." Standing fast on firm principles, codified in the writings of Marx and Engels and the first four Congresses of the Communist International, the League continued to root its perspectives in revolutionary internationalism and opposition to the theory of "socialism in one country"; defense of the Soviet Union; insistence that the road forward could only be reached via united front struggles and trade union policies that both refused the panacea of isolated "Red" unions and capitulation to the reactionary mainstream trade union leadership; and commitment to the kind of democratic centralism that allowed both freedom of discussion and criticism as well as effective, unified action. Nonetheless, after a long, four year struggle against "the arrogant bureaucratism and ultimatic methods of Stalinism," the American Left Opposition acknowledged that it was time to look outwards from its past practice of defining itself as an external faction of the Communist Party, guided in its political work by a strategy of recruiting the Party membership to its understanding of what constituted the original and still viable revolutionary program of Bolshevism. The CLA was "ready to give attentive and comradely consideration to ... different proposals" and to "recognize firmly that ... striving to reform the party of official Stalinism is exhausted."¹⁴⁴

In Germany the Communist Party's failure to effectively oppose Hitler signaled its ultimate demise as a revolutionary force, a realization that dawned in Trotskyist circles as early as March 1933. Calling for the creation of a new Party in Germany was but the precursor for a more wide-ranging argument about Stalin's Comintern. As architect of the demoralization of the world forces of revolution in the epoch of Third Period sectarianism and Communist isolation, the Comintern and its affiliated national sections were no longer a revolutionary force and had to be built anew through the regroupment of those who could be won to revolutionary politics outside the established Communist Parties. An ILO International Secretariat Plenum in Paris in August 1933 espoused this new orientation, although it was opposed by segments of the European Left Opposition, including the Parisian-based Jewish Group, which split from the Ligue. As these international developments unfolded, the Communist League of America was also engaged in a fundamental reorientation, struggling to negotiate just how to decisively move forward without dwelling on the many hurdles that had impeded its advance in the recent past. Cannon

144 "For a New Party and a New International!" *The Militant*, 30 September 1933.

and Shachtman, and elements of their respective groups, remained dubious about how much had really changed, and bad blood continued to exist well into 1933. Back-and-forth bickering prevailed in November 1933, for instance, with subjects such as the timing of the CLA's third conference, the possible move of the League's headquarters from New York to Chicago, and the nature of Left Opposition mass work in the unions, particularly among the Illinois miners, all the cause of friction.

Nonetheless, there were signs of advance, and in June 1933, both the Cannon and Shachtman factions declared that there were no political differences separating them. They pledged to work together and with the International Secretariat to advance the Left Opposition, and shared a common view that the American situation was ripe for the League's independent activity in the class struggle. The view was put forward that in working out a common approach to mass work, the two CLA factions would inevitably overcome the divisions that had plagued the American Left Opposition since 1930, thereby creating a healthy internal situation within the League for the first time in years. The result of this National Committee peace treaty was, in effect, the unification of the leadership and the liquidation of factional organizations. Both sides rallied unanimously to Trotsky's August 1933 proposal to shift the ILO orientation from one of changing the political direction of the Stalinist Communist parties and the Communist International to organizing new parties and a new International, drafting a program of concrete proposals to further this end within the American section. CLA publications, such as Shachtman's November 1933-published pamphlet, *Ten Years: History and Principles of the Left Opposition*, referred to the new course as one of "breaking relentlessly and completely with the decadent Stalinist apparatus." Trotsky, constantly appealed to by both sides, summed up what was seemingly the agreed-upon route to unity in a 20 November 1933 letter to Swabeck: "no immediate national conference, transfer of the leadership to Chicago, energetic mass work, and overcoming the internal differences by this road." Too often the ILO leader was exasperated with the continuation of the seeming crisis in the American section: "nothing has changed," Trotsky wrote to Glotzer in July 1933; "a worsening has set in again," he complained to Shachtman five months later, after having commented to Swabeck that "recent letters from America were rather disquieting."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ The above paragraphs draw on Swabeck to Cannon, "Setting a Date for the Conference," 16 April 1933, 504–506; Swabeck to Cannon, "An Offensive for Unity," 16 April 1933, 506–507; Trotsky to International Secretariat, "I Am Not More Favorable to the Minority," 17 April 1933, 507–509; Swabeck to Cannon, "Shachtman Flounders Between Scholasticism and Softness on Stalinism," 17 April 1933, 509–511; Shachtman to Glotzer, "We Will Not Suspend

Yet in the end, Trotsky's counsels and his hopes seemed realized. The Communist League of America, no longer an Opposition, pulled out of the dog days in 1933–34. Membership expanded to 350 in 26 branches, and there were promising signs of growth among Jewish, Greek, and Italian clubs, as well as in the Spartacus Youth, which had some 200 members. National tours by CLA spokesmen such as Hugo Oehler revealed a new interest in Trotskyist politics: "Everywhere, with practically no exception, the League branches are teaming with activity and increasing their membership."¹⁴⁶ As CLA activities broadened and new members found their way to Left Opposition ideas, "the danger of an exacerbation of the internal struggle diminish[ed]."¹⁴⁷

Cannon's speeches of this period are punctuated with enthusiasm and energy, his revival articulated in a rhetoric of possibility, reaching out to galvanize new adherents to the revolutionary cause. As the personal demoralization and factional fog of the dog days lifted, Cannon grew increasingly passionate: "Build the League, break from the isolation and stagnation!" Rough notes for a speech on "Fascism" conveyed a sense of his new perspective:

Our Fight," 17 April 1933, 512–513; Shachtman to Glotzer, "Our Group Must Not Dissolve," 1 May 1933, 519–528; Trotsky to Shachtman, "The European Sections Will Not Support You," 1 May 1933, 529–530; Swabeck to Cannon, "International Consultation is Key," 12 May 1933, 530–534; Plenum of the International Left Opposition, "Resolution on the American Question," 13–16 May 1933, 534–535; Glotzer to Shachtman, "Foolish and Petty Actions Did Not Help Us," 23 May 1933, 536–542; CLA, *Internal Bulletin*, Number 14 (29 June 1933), "Peace Treaty," 542–543; Shachtman to Comrades, "We Must Call a Retreat," 9 June 1933, 543–551; Shachtman to Abern, "Report from Prinkipo," 6 July 1933, 552–556; Swabeck to IS and Trotsky, "A Possible Leap Forward," 10 July 1933, 565–567; Trotsky to Glotzer, "A Radical Change is Necessary," 12 July 1933, 568–569; Shachtman to Abern, "I Won't Make an Issue of Chicago Move," 13 July 1933, 570–580; CLA, National Committee, "Action Program of the Communist League," 581–582; Shachtman to Glotzer, "Implementing the Action Program," 7 September 1933, 583–585; Shachtman to Glotzer, "A Big Mistake," 19 September 1933, 586–590; Shachtman to Cannon, "Cannon is Reneging," 5 October 1933, 594–598; Trotsky to Swabeck, "The News is Disquieting," 20 November 1933, 598–599; Trotsky to Shachtman, "A Turn for the Worse," 25 November 1933; Swabeck to Trotsky, "Reasons to Postpone the Move," 20 December 1933, 600–605, all in *Dog Days*. See also "For a New Party and a New International!" *The Militant*, 30 September 1933; CLA, *Internal Bulletin*, Number 12 (19 April 1933); Number 13 (29 April 1933); Number 14 (29 June 1933); Max Shachtman, *Ten Years: History and Principles of the Left Opposition* (New York: Pioneer Publications, 1933), 5.

146 Swabeck, "Report on the Communist League of America (Opposition)," 15 December 1933, summarized in *Dog Days*, 65; CLA, National Committee Minutes, 23 November 1933, "Report on National Tour."

147 Trotsky to Shachtman, "As Opportunities Grow, Internal Struggle Will Diminish," 30 January 1934, *Dog Days*, 605–606.

1. Fateful days for Proletariat
2. Busy days for revolutionists
3. Great changes and sudden turns
4. Test validity of programs, parties, and factions
5. In such events great organizations are demolished and small ones grow and come to power
6. We put same test to ourselves – weak and barely able to crawl yesterday. We must learn to leap today.

Cannon's message to the ranks of the CLA was unambiguous: "No Routine – ... – no carping criticism from the sidelines – no whining. Action – Action – Action." One key area of work was the "New rise of Labor," and Cannon urged the League to "go deeper and organize," just as he pressed to expand the publication of *The Militant*. "We have no money it is true. But we have the will and we will get the money!"

Noting that the Left Opposition was small, Cannon was nevertheless steeled in the conviction that, "our mission is great." The task was to "rise to it like true revolutionists." Speaking in Toronto, Canada in November 1933, Cannon celebrated the sixteenth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, declaring "their fire illuminated our path," insistent that if Stalinism had destroyed the Third International "salvation depends on the Fourth." Now, as in 1917–19, he declared, internationalism and class struggle constituted humanity's hope.¹⁴⁸

13 Internal Ironies

American Trotskyism's dog days were overdetermined. The context was politically cramped. Economic downturn, the Comintern's Third Period shift to the ostensible left, the Communist League of America's acute poverty, Cannon's particularly distressed personal circumstances and his resulting political demoralization (however episodic), intensifying bitterness of the break from him of Shachtman, Abern, Spector, Glotzer, and others, and the Left Opposition's clarification of controversial international issues: this was a lot to process. It all congealed in the brief but formative 1930–33 years, setting the stage on which the CLA battled not only capitalism and Stalinism, but, too often, itself.

148 Cannon, Rough Notes, "Fascism (Mass Meeting), Manhattan Lyceum, 1/5/33," and "Toronto Speech, November 1933," Reels 33 & 34, Boxes 27 & 28, JPC Papers. See also Cannon's journalism on trade union matters in *The Militant*, one example of which appears in Stanton and Taber, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 282–286.

If Jim Cannon managed to hold on to his principled political perspective, as well as grasp intuitively the political direction that the League should chart, both on the trade union domestic front and within the international arena, he nonetheless gravitated too easily to organizational solutions to fundamentally political problems. His blunt bureaucratism was learned behavior within the Stalinism milieu that had to be unlearned, however slowly. As Cannon would later concede:

Probably the hardest lesson I had to learn from Trotsky, after ten years of bad schooling through the Communist Party faction fights, was to let organizational questions wait until the political issues were fully clarified, not only in the National Committee but also in the ranks of the party. It is no exaggeration, but the full and final truth, that our party owes its very existence today to the fact that some of us learned this hard lesson and learned also how to apply it in practice.¹⁴⁹

In 1931–33, however, this pedagogy of revolutionary politics was only in its first stages of being taught, and Cannon could hardly be said to have committed its lessons to memory, let alone put them into practice. Rather than extend his constructive talents to those, such as Shachtman and Abern, who had come to denigrate him personally, he opted instead to try to freeze them out of the leadership that they demanded as their entitlement. Counseled by Trotsky, Cannon matured as a political leader of the Left Opposition, albeit haltingly. To be sure, his pride would sometimes not let him acknowledge adequately his own shortcomings (especially as they related to his period of partial political withdrawal), and much interpretive breath and too many defensive words were wasted on Cannon's insistence that the American Left Opposition was in some senses synonymous with his own Party faction in the 1920s. Balanced against this egocentrism was also Cannon's capacity to listen to Trotsky's criticisms about his organizational intransigence. He began to alter practices within the National Committee majority aligned with him so as to accommodate the minority and open the League to new elements.¹⁵⁰ By 1933 Cannon was suf-

149 James P. Cannon to the Secretariat, for NC Majority Only, 8 February 1966, reprinted as "Don't Try to Enforce a Nonexistent Law," in Cannon, *Don't Strangle the Party!* (New York: Fourth Internationalist Tendency, 1991), 9.

150 See, as examples, Cannon to Swabeck, "Concessions to the Minority," April 1933, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 246–248; CLA, National Committee Minutes, 5 April 1933, "Motions by Cannon," Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers, also in *Dog Days*, 495–496.

ficiently energized and attentive to fairness towards the minority, that he was poised to rightly reclaim his status as the Communist League of America's pre-eminent figure.¹⁵¹

In this revival of Cannon, he was aided immensely by those, such as Arne Swabeck and Rose Karsner, who understood his limitations but shored up Cannon's sometimes lackadaisical approach to necessary administrative detail with their own contributions to the stability of the internal regime of the Communist League of America.¹⁵² Cannon also relied on old comrades, not only for political support, but for material aid when it was desperately needed. At specific conjunctures, one of which occurred in May 1933, factionalism and finances converged in an ugliness which exacerbated relations within the League and threatened to damage its reputation internationally. Thus a question arose of funds supposedly raised to aid the precarious German Left Opposition, faced with the deadly consequences of Hitler's rise to power, being diverted to other purposes, including funding Swabeck's return from Europe. Faced with allegations of improprieties, Cannon and his allies, who genuinely did not understand where and how funds had been channeled, had no option but to raise more cash. Cannon wrote to Swabeck, his letter highlighting a long list of dog days complaints: "This brings up the question of the funds for your return. I did succeed in making a loan of \$75 for this purpose, but was compelled to use it right way for the most pressing current obligations and have not been able to get it out again. You know the minority has yet to contribute One Cent to this fund. I am doing my best in this regard and hope to cable you enough money to get to Paris and send the balance there." Shorty Buehler in Kansas City managed to scrape up \$150.00 and wire it to New York, to the great relief of Rose Karsner. But within the Cannon camp there was understandable animosity, one comrade writing to Rose Karsner from Minneapolis: "I was greatly surprised and upset to learn that the financial situation remains so acute and that the difficulties are increased and complicated by dishonest and disloyal agitation over the German funds. The motive for this rotten campaign, this nauseating fakeristic "defense of the German Opposition against the NC," is obviously to sabotage and hold up the sending of funds to Swabeck as long as possible. Why didn't they raise the question of the German funds when Shachtman was grabbing all the money in sight for his personal expenses to Europe?"¹⁵³ Locales

151 Glotzer to Abern and Shachtman, "Cannon a New Man in Chicago," 6 February 1933, *Dog Days*, 412–415; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 105, 127.

152 Swabeck to Cannon, 16 April 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

153 Cannon to Swabeck, 7 April 1933, attached to National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 19 April 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers; Swabeck to Cannon, 17 April 1933; No

like Minneapolis were now firmly aligned with Cannon, poised to put Trotskyism on the increasingly militant map of American class struggle.¹⁵⁴

The upturn in the American labor movement, itself coming out of its own Depression-induced dog days, as well as the intensifying climate of progressive anti-fascism evident in the United States and the world, rekindled Cannon's revolutionary passions: "I had the feeling ... that things were beginning to break," he later wrote. "The stagnation, the stalemate in the world labor movement was breaking wide open. We were fully ready to take our part in the new situation. ... Our action was unconsciously synchronized with the breakup of the stalemate in Germany. We reacted very energetically to this new development, to the beginnings of new stirrings of the labor movement here, and especially the situation in Germany."¹⁵⁵

Cannon's counterparts, most emphatically Max Shachtman, sustained the Left Opposition during their mentor's personal retreat, but they lacked both compassion and understanding of Cannon's situation. They clung tenaciously, if sadly, to a resentful and ultimately vindictive dismissal of Cannon's appropriateness as the League's leader, even as a vital contributor to a collective leadership. Unable to separate personal grievance from political criticism, and prone to cultivate the factionalism of cliques and personal sociability networks, Shachtman and others came to be blinded by their arrogance. A certain learnedness around questions of theoretical and international issues cultivated in them a sense of superiority over Cannon. They forgot, in the context of an internal CLA regime increasingly deformed by the poisonous atmosphere of personalized antagonisms, and contextualized by its marginality, what had attracted them to Cannon in their days in the Workers (Communist) Party: his undeniable abilities as a workers' leader capable of appreciating and reading the pulse of American working-class militancy, intervening in class struggles to advance revolutionary politics, and extending the best that comrades had to offer, even as those talents sometimes reached past his own in

author [Oehler?] to Rose Karsner, 29 May 1933; Buehler to Cannon, 29 May 1933; Abern to Comrades, 1 June 1933; Karsner to Cannon, 1 June 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

154 Sam Gordon in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 63–65; Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 171–172; William F. Dunne and Morris Childs, *Permanent Counter-Revolution: The Role of the Trotskyites in the Minneapolis Strikes* (New York: Workers Library, 1934); and for a typical example of Shachtman's denigration of the Minneapolis Trotskyists: Shachtman to Edwards, [no date, July 1932?], Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers.

155 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 105–106. As an introduction only to the labor revival see Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 3–84; Irving Bernstein, *The Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933–1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), esp. 1–317.

specific areas. Overcome by a truly unfortunate political myopia, Shachtman, guided by ‘chumminess’ in his dealings with both European and North American comrades in the International Left Opposition, soon translated the politics of cliquism into fundamental political errors of judgment. These surfaced most decisively and visibly around a series of international issues in 1931–33. Trotsky was forced to intervene to curb and correct Shachtman’s proclivities for unprincipled combinations, lest they irrevocably harm the fragile foundations of an International Left Opposition that was necessarily groping its way towards a coherent political program and a stable institutional structure. Shachtman’s tendency to lapse into a politics of conciliation that threatened to compromise political principle within the European Left Opposition thus repeatedly angered Trotsky, who nonetheless continued to maintain supportive and friendly relations with his American comrade.

This problem arose fleetingly in February – April 1933 with the Red Army dispute. Shachtman’s position contained within it the seeds of conciliatory capitulation. It was masked by his tactical correction of Cannon’s possible bending of the stick of principled political understanding of the international role of the Red Army in the direction of an adventurist formulation of *immediate* intervention in the German crisis. Cannon noted that Shachtman’s critique of his position not only appeared *after* the Stalinists began to denounce Cannon’s ostensible demagogic demand that the Soviet Union be drawn militarily into the German crisis, but that Shachtman had failed to challenge and criticize the Stalinist outcry against Cannon, instead adapting to its politics of internationalist retreat.¹⁵⁶ At stake was not only Stalinism’s abdication of internationalism in a politics of “socialism in one country,” but also the retrograde politics of abandonment of the defense of the Soviet Union against fascist and imperialist aggression. Trotsky, extremely reticent to intervene in American affairs, nonetheless sensed intuitively that Shachtman’s positions inside the United States League must necessarily relate to the political tendencies he exhibited in Europe: “Comrade Shachtman’s behavior is extremely disturbing to me, and I cannot easily separate the American struggle from the international questions,” he wrote to Glotzer. In a public letter to the League on its internal disputes, in which Trotsky promised further study and an attempt to keep an open mind with respect to the minority’s claims in spite of Shachtman’s harmful European mistakes, he added further that, “it is not easy to assume that one is right on the most important national questions if one is always wrong on the most important international ones.”¹⁵⁷

156 Cannon, “Note on Shachtman’s Statement,” 18 March 1933, *Dog Days*, 446–448.

157 Trotsky to Glotzer, “Personal Combinations vs. Revolutionary Politics,” 1 May 1932 and Trot-

Cannon's organizational impatience was thus confounded by the personal and political impatience of Shachtman, Abern, Glotzer, Spector and others. The irony of the internal disputes of this period was that it was precisely the overdetermined circumstances of these difficult dog days that conditioned so much of the factional animosity that almost brought incipient American Trotskyism to a standstill. This national, domestic, and regime context, however configured by *locally* determined developments, could only be overcome by *international* intervention. Trotsky and the International Left Opposition eventually provided the guidance needed to ameliorate the impasse. So embedded in discords that were open to alternative interpretations were the tensions of the time that it was not possible for either side to convince the other that it had indeed been following the more righteous course. *Internationalism* showed the American League a way forward, but the activities that would finally put long-standing factional grievance to rest were, of course, necessarily conducted on the *national* home ground of the CLA.

That Cannon had been negligent in his early League duties was undeniable; that Shachtman and those around him had elevated personal resentments to an unwarranted political repudiation was equally the case. As the situation went from bad to worse, Cannon brought himself out of his political demoralization. Revived and energetic, he could nevertheless not quite bring himself to clean the slate with his former factional allies, who imagined themselves now not only superior to their former leader, but the heirs to the League's authority. The talents they brought to their respective posts, while considerable, were not instinctually attuned to the pace and tone of the American class struggle or the fundamentals of Left Opposition principles that Trotsky himself valued. This was especially the case when European developments called forth the necessity of a certain intransigence, not on organizational and administrative matters, but in the fundamental arena of political principle. Cannon, whose internationalism was held in such low regard by his factional opponents, emerged, oddly enough, as the most tried and true Left Opposition internationalist. He also hit the ground running in 1933 with respect to involving the CLA directly in the American class struggle.

The final irony, then, was that out of the dog days of United States Trotskyism's often tortured beginnings would come a great leap forward premised on mass work. It would be led by the very figure, Jim Cannon, who had, in the depths of those difficult times, argued against critics outside the League (Weis-

sky to the CLA, National Committee, "On Weisbord and International Questions," 19 May 1932, *Dog Days*, 218–220, 222–223.

bord) and inside it, that as an external faction of the Communist International and its American Party, the CLA must restrict its role to that of a propaganda group. This Shachtman and his supporters challenged and argued against. In the circumstances of the early years of the Great Depression and the Comintern's Third Period adventurism, however, it was probably true, as Cannon claimed, that to overextend the reach of the American Left Opposition would condemn it to failures and defeats difficult to live down. Equally important, the decision to orient to the Communist Party, a basic premise of the original Russian Left Opposition, and one that was embraced further by all Left Opposition sections, needed to be allowed to run its course, in the process educating cadre in the complex politics of Marxism-Leninism during an epoch of capitalist *and* Stalinist crisis. But when the moment was ripe, brought to fruition by Stalinism's policies as well as capitalism's developing contradictions, evident in the economic collapse of the 1930s as well as the political crisis posed for the entire left by the rise of fascism, new directions had to be forged in opposition to outmoded positions and perspectives.

Timing, in the politics of revolutionary organization, proved decisive. And the 1933–34 turn of the International Left Opposition to mass work and the creation of new vehicles of revolutionary organization liberated Cannon and the Trotskyist American League on two critically important fronts. First, the prison-house of labor quietude, on the one hand, was decidedly broken open. American workers finally showed signs of marshalling the resolve and organizational innovation to throw off the constraints of capitalist economic collapse, mobilizing new sectors of revolt and offering challenging demands that set the stage for the campaigns of industrial unionism and the modern trade union movement. This offered Cannon and the Communist League of America an unprecedented theatre in which to enact their revolutionary dramas. Second, as Stalinism ran its course of self-destruction in the Third Period, the limitations of its Left Opposition orienting only to the Communist International and its national Parties were inevitably cleared from the political deck. As sectarianism and ultra-left isolation immobilized and demoralized the German working class and its powerful Communist Party, Trotsky was forced to recognize that the original strategy of the Left Opposition, with its accent on conquering the established apparatus of actually-existing Communist organization and re-establishing within it a revolutionary program, was no longer feasible. The threat of fascism turned into the reality of Hitler in power, revealing the tragic bankruptcy of Comintern Third Period policies. Stalinism crossed over into the camp of obstructing rather than advancing revolution. Little more than a corpse, it could not be revived. The result, in the call for new parties of communism and a new International, freed Cannon and the Communist League

of America to pursue a wider course, one that again opened the door to previously unanticipated organizational breakthroughs. Combined, this labor front and the expansive organizational alternatives now available to the forces of the Left Opposition, would take American Trotskyism out of its dog days of marginalization and factional mayhem. And yet even as the polarizing issues of the Communist League of America's 1930–33 history seemed fundamentally vanquished in the immediate and often tumultuously different events of 1934–38, they were not so much dispensed with as they were displaced to a subterranean sideline, destined to resurface in a later period of more focused political differentiation.

Daylight: Analysis and Action

1 1933–34: Past, Present, and Future

The dog days were difficult. “Cruel and heavy times,” was how Cannon would later describe them. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx wrote that, “The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” For Cannon, there must have been many a moment in the 1930–33 years when he wondered whether it would ever be possible to throw off the oppressively cumbersome yoke of the revolutionary past, burdened as it seemingly was by disillusioning debacles. Yet the very internationalism that had drawn him towards Bolshevism in 1917, only to let him down decisively as he confronted Stalinism’s retreat into the narrow defeatism of “socialism in one country,” also revived him as he turned to the promise of the Left Opposition in 1928. By 1933 Cannon saw directly how Trotsky’s guidance was critically important in providing perspective and insistence that revolutionary politics must rest on the foundation of principled positions. In Trotsky’s writings and correspondence the Communist League of America (Opposition), even when seemingly divided against itself, benefitted from a common body of analytic thought that proved nothing less than “a window on a whole new world of theory and political understanding.” However much the difficulties of the League [CLA] pressed on Cannon and others, they found in the “intervention of the International Secretariat” a collaboration that sustained their rough ride through the early 1930s. It allowed them “to hold the organization together and to be ready when ... opportunity came.” Internationalism, Cannon concluded, was *the* vital strengthening link in the chain of revolutionary politics. It made it possible to survive periods like the dog days. Against all odds, battling isolation and seeming irrelevance, Cannon and the American League “held out until 1933, and then we began to see daylight. Then the Trotskyists started to get on the political map of [the United States].”¹

It was, in retrospect, easy to see the breakthroughs of 1933–34 as the dawn of a new day for Cannon and the Communist League of America. “Politics,”

1 James P. Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism: Report of a Participant* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1944), 99–100; Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 97.

Cannon claimed “is the art of making the right move at the right time.”² In this assertion he was undoubtedly correct. But Cannon was not prone to go far enough in elaborating how the dog days were left behind, remembering the 1930–33 years one-sidedly as an almost entirely negative experience. It is possible, however, to regard this period, as unfortunate as it was, as also containing within it *some* of the seeds of future advance. The bad of the dog days coexisted with the good, even as what was positive was not always able to develop in the best manner.

Analytic insights that had been in the making since Cannon’s, Abern’s, and Shachtman’s 1928 stand against Stalinism and its grip on the Workers (Communist) Party, for instance, were impossible to separate entirely from the drift into the ugly and personalized clique politics of the dog days. As debilitating as the factionalism of the early 1930s proved to be in American Trotskyist circles, it did clarify old positions as well as nurture new insights on specific and critically important “national questions.” Cannon, experiencing the first uncertain stages of political demoralization at the time that he struggled, along with others, to write the American Left Opposition’s original platform, relied very much on his experience within the Workers (Communist) Party as he drafted passages outlining the League’s perspective on the labor party and on black self-determination. For the most part, refinement of these analytic spheres came slowly and was filtered through the personal animosities of dog days factionalism. A youthful cohort of Left Oppositionists pushed hard for the necessity of a fresh set of revolutionary eyes on the political and analytic issues surrounding what was then known as “the Negro question.” In the case of the approach of the CLA to the labor party, Cannon himself was undoubtedly the source of positive movement, but he was prodded to focus his thoughts by his opponents.

Activist intervention in the class struggle in these years was never inseparable from such challenges to elaborate programmatic direction. On many levels, this seemed more the monopoly of Cannon and an older, trade union/labor defense contingent. Central components of these Left Opposition campaigns included agitation among the unemployed, the Illinois miners, New York City hotel and restaurant workers, mobilizations on behalf of the class-war prisoner Tom Mooney, and new developments in party formation paced by progressive and class concerns, all of which figured forcefully in the League’s 1933–34 activities. As “the German crisis” unfolded, both the Shachtman and Cannon factions contributed to mass forums and debates, although not, as we have seen, without internal disagreement. In the fusion of Trotskyism’s past,

2 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 113.

present, and future in the Communist League of America in 1933–34, then, something of a division of collective leadership was recognized, however awkwardly and contentiously it was implemented.

Trotsky and the International Secretariat tried to mediate the clashing forces of Shachtman, Glotzer, and others versus Cannon, Swabeck, and their allies, preeminent among them the Minneapolis trade unionists and, on a theoretical level, Hugo Oehler, especially, as we have seen, on questions of an international kind. Trotsky was best able to command authority on issues that had direct American relevance, such as the labor party, when he had a past familiarity with what was at stake and grasped both the particular nature of the problem posed in the United States as well as general principles of central importance. On other issues, where he was both less well informed and unable to chart a secure course his counsel was less useful. Nowhere was this clearer than in the case of developing a new perspective on the strategic orientation of the Left Opposition toward racism in the United States, and the pivotal place of blacks in the revolutionary movement. In general, however, Trotsky and the International Left Opposition were an undeniable resource for the Communist League of America.

As both the Cannon and Shachtman groups recognized what each could contribute, some of the animosities of 1930–33 lessened. The nascent American Trotskyist movement saw daylight, in 1933–34, through the not entirely reconciled, but undeniably aligned, vision of dog days antagonists.

2 Context: Revival/Reorientation

For Cannon, and arguably for the League as a whole, the central issue stimulating revival in 1933–34 was a generalized upturn in class struggle, which carried into the wider political arena a resuscitation of left wing thought and activity. One measure of this, of course, was that Trotskyists in the United States were able, sadly, to point to the Comintern's ineffectiveness in combating Hitler's rise to power in Germany. Left Opposition perspectives gained credibility as the desperate circumstances of the workers' movement in Europe were emphasized by Cannon and his comrades. That said, the upswing in American labor activity was perhaps the key stimulus to the Communist League of America, increasing its capacity to engage, for the first time, in mass activities that had the potential to put it in contact with insurgent workers.

The devastating economic collapse of 1929–32 undermined workers' mobilization. By 1933, however, the downturn bottomed out. The "fathomless pessimism" that one journalist commented on in 1931, noting that, "The energy of

the country has suffered a strange paralysis," seemed finally over. Louis Adamic, touring the "tragic towns of New England" during the depths of the Depression, commented that the people were beaten down: "There was something dead in them," he wrote, "as from exhaustion or perhaps too much idleness, without any personal winsomeness or any power of demand." In contrast, 1932–33 saw signs in urban settings as well as in outposts of rural production that rebellion and resistance were on the rise. Communist-led demonstrations of the unemployed were often raucous displays of discontent. Miner strikes and riotous attacks on company stores witnessed window-smashing, looting, and threats against storekeepers. Grocery store invasions and group boardings of city streetcars demonstrated that the urban jobless were now agitated enough to seize goods and services, refusing to pay and insisting that if any bill was due it should be the responsibility of established authorities. In Chicago, a crowd of destitute persons, angered that a landlord had sold a building while many were homeless, dismantled the four-storey structure and hauled its bricks, two-by-fours, doors, windows, and other materials away. Farmers, masked in blue bandanas, dragged sitting judges from their benches to country crossroads, demanding an end to foreclosures under the threat of lynchings. Adamic's sad reflections on the "infinitely apathetic, not to say appalling" tragedy of acquiescence to the economics and sociology of the Great Depression was replaced by the suggestion that "The word revolution is heard at every hand."³

After almost four years in which the material well-being of American workers was driven down to the point that it seemed it could go no lower, there was a discernable change in the political, economic, and cultural climate. The politics of Republican exhortation, epitomized in Herbert Hoover's ideology of economic recovery by balanced budgets, improved international trade, and currency stabilization failed to achieve much in the way of political traction as capitalist crisis deepened in the first two years of the 1930s. Hoover was politically scarred by the Great Depression's multiple injuries. Associated with the view that the out-of-work were themselves to blame for their unemployment, his administration's maladroit handling of the veterans' Bonus Army march on

3 William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932–1940* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), esp. 26–27, 51, citing Gerald Johnson, "Bryan, Thou Shouldst Be Living: A Plea for Demagogues," *Harper's*, 93 (1931), 388; Louis Adamic, "Tragic Towns of New England," *Harper's*, 92 (1931), 755; George Leighton, "And If The Revolution Comes ...?" *Harper's*, 94 (1932), 466. There is of course much in the original liberal statement on this period: Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919–1933* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956). For a useful survey of protests of the dispossessed see Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 41–95.

Washington symbolized Hoover's aloof separation from the growing numbers of American jobless. The White House was put under armed guard, its gates chained, and the surrounding streets cleared of people. With the Bonus Army protesters driven into retreat, dispersed by tanks, tear gas, and torches, Hoover's fate was sealed. The patrician Franklin Delano Roosevelt secured the Presidency for the Democratic Party in a landslide November 1932 electoral victory. Mainstream politics took a left-reform tilt with the establishment of Roosevelt's ill-defined National Recovery Administration [NRA] in 1933. Talk of a "new deal" was in the air, although few knew exactly what it would entail.⁴

Roosevelt's push to bring America out of its economic doldrums was less planned than it was fortuitous. Bluntly put, the Democratic President had no blueprint for bringing the economy back to health. Anything seemed an improvement on Hoover's glum resignation, his governance marked in the public eye by pessimism and defeat. Roosevelt's warm, infectious smile, his blithe optimism, his ease before the public, and his refusal to give in to the fear spawned by the collapse of the economy meant that his often contradictory bundle of initiatives was welcomed more than it was analyzed critically. An expanded works program proved a stroke of public relations genius in creating hope on the employment front. Businesses found the relaxation of anti-trust regulations gave them leeway in charting the free enterprise course (a wheel of development increasingly greased with the formation of company unions). Organized labor's mainstream was soon to be wedded to the Democratic Party because of Section 7 (a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act [NIRA]. Heralded by subsequent scholarship as breakthrough legislation which opened the door to unionization and collective bargaining, Roosevelt and Section 7 (a) actually provided little of material substance for workers battling to build unions, offering mostly rhetorical promise to those struggling to secure collective bargaining rights. As Art Preis stated clearly long ago, and as Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins noted in her recollections of the period, the NIRA and Section 7 (a) in particular were reluctant responses to popular pressure. American labor was on the militant move well before Roosevelt's legislation was introduced in mid-June 1933. As James Gray Pope has more recently argued, Section 7 (a) had far less impact than initiatives from below, expressed in militant strike action that constituted nothing less than "worker lawmaking," a process that unleashed a vicious and violent employer opposition.⁵

4 Introductions to the Hoover to Roosevelt transformation can be found in Leuchtenburg, *Roosevelt and the New Deal*, esp. 1–95; Irving Bernstein, *The Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933–1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), esp. 1–216.

5 Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step: Twenty Years of the CIO* (New York: Pioneer, 1964), 12–13, and

Roosevelt's legislative placations would have meant even less had the economy remained mired in stagnation, with employment closing down, workers thrown on the relief rolls in increasing numbers, and production spiraling ever downward. The coalition of class interests that Roosevelt's ambiguous policies managed to initially piece together would never have floated, however buoyant the bargain, if there were not indications of advance on the economic front.

Signs of recovery appeared in the spring air of 1934. Business and production indexes climbed in the March to July 1934 period; the hemorrhaging of the economy seemed to have eased as the ranks of the unemployed shrank by two million; and national income stood one-quarter higher in 1934 than it had been in 1933. In Detroit, paced by a surge in auto industry production, twice as many workers were on company payrolls as had been the case a year earlier. All of this seemed propitious. Yet it would prove short lived, the much vaunted Roosevelt New Deal recovery sputtering almost before it managed to fire up the engines of revival. And as the economy simply refused to pull decisively out of its longstanding ruts, cracks in the New Deal dam holding back the oppositional currents widened.⁶

for the early "war on labor under the NRA," 14–18. Recent work by James Gray Pope argues convincingly that the much-vaunted Section 7 (a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act, supposedly an inducement to workers to organize unions, was preceded by crucial labor insurgencies that prodded Congress to pass the NIRA and induced the Supreme Court to uphold it. Pope notes that such worker mobilizations constituted a struggle for popular constitutionalism centered on the right to organize and bargain collectively. Pope also notes that the original early impact of 7 (a) was to encourage business to establish company unions, and that left-wing organizations originally dubbed the Roosevelt labor legislation an "instrument of capital" and an "Industrial Slavery Act." These insights shore up a perspective at odds with much liberal scholarship. See James Gray Pope, "The Western Pennsylvania Coal Strike of 1933, Part 1: Lawmaking from Below and the Revival of the United Mine Workers," *Labor History*, 44 (2003), 15–48; Rebecca Zietlow and James Gray Pope, "The Toledo Auto-Lite Strike and the Fight Against 'Wage Slavery,'" *University of Toledo Law Review*, 38 (2007), 839–854; and in the same vein, but for a later period, James Gray Pope, "Worker Legitimacy, Sit-Down Strikes, and the Shaping of American Industrial Relations, 1935–1958," *Law and History Review*, 24 (2006), 45–113. Note as well Michael Goldfield and Cody R. Melcher, "The Myth of Section 7 (a): Worker Militancy, Progressive Labor Legislation, and the Coal Miners," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History*, 16 (No. 4, 2019), 49–65.

- 6 Gray's publications, cited above, are instructive, but much can be gleaned from an older liberal scholarship. See, for instance, Leuchtenburg, *Roosevelt and the New Deal*, esp. 63–94, and for discussion of Roosevelt's limited support for labor by 1935, 108–109; and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958). For an insightful and refreshingly broad outline of the importance of early New Deal innovations as both liberating and cooptive for American labor see David Montgomery, "American Workers and the New Deal Formula," in Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (London: Cambridge University Press,

Animosities that surfaced rudely if often informally throughout the Great Depression trough of the early 1930s began to register in more formal working-class expressions of protest and organization in 1933–34. Roughly three times as many workers opted to strike in 1933 as waged job actions in 1932. The labor front was relatively quiet for the first six months of 1933, but thereafter the numbers of workers walking picket lines jumped dramatically. In July 1933 some 1,375,000 worker days were lost to strikes, a figure more than double that of any similar monthly count in the January – June period; August 1933 saw an astounding 2,378,000 worker days eaten up in labor-capital conflict. All told, 1933 witnessed more strikes than at any time in the United States since 1921. With 1934, the strike wave reached tsunami proportions: 1856 work stoppages involving almost 1.5 million workers. As P.K. Edwards demonstrates in his overview of the history of strikes in the United States, 1933–34 was a tumultuous time, in which annual strike indices recorded numbers of workers involved per strike that exceeded all other years from 1927–45. According to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., the lines of labor-capital conflict were drawn in blood in community after community. With “each side fighting for its life,” many thought that class relations in America “approached civil war.”⁷

What distinguished this “eruption,” as it has been called by labor historian Irving Bernstein, was a new sociology, demography, and *politics* of class mobilization. This early New Deal strike wave occurred before the 1935 passage of the Wagner Act, and thus relied far less on ostensible government protections of workers’ rights than it did on rank-and-file militancy. More to the point, the vanguard of this working-class uprising was neither the ossified officialdom of the American Federation of Labor craft unions nor the disgruntled, but bureaucratized, trade union tops who, aligned with John L. Lewis, would form the respectable face of the post-1937 mass production breakthroughs of the Con-

1979), 153–180. Mike Davis, “The Barren Marriage of American Labor and the Democratic Party,” in Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (London and New York: Verso, 1986), 52–101 presents a congruent but more pessimistic argument. The importance of this period in the history of American workers is outlined in Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 20–53, where the interpretive accent is on the early Rooseveltian commitment to “security,” fueling a sense of working-class rights and entitlements, and the New Deal’s legacy as a stimulus to attitudinal changes on the part of working men and women. Note as well Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 261, 289.

7 Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal*, 385; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 172–173, 217; P.K. Edwards, *Strikes in the United States, 1881–1974* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 138; Edward Levinson, *Labor on the March* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938), 55–57.

gress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Rather, the 1933–34 upheaval was paced by young workers, many of whom were either second-generation immigrants or, especially in the case of the largely unorganized South, relatively unprotected by unionism.

As Mike Davis has suggested, the sons and daughters of the “new immigrants” of the 1900–20 years found themselves, in 1933–34, “occupationally frozen in semi-hereditary unskilled and menial slots, forced to bear the brunt of urban poverty and hard times.” Noting that these immigrant youth had both Americanized with respect to their integration into the culture of the United States and their mastery of English and understanding of the entitlements of industrial citizenship, Davis suggests that “this second generation was ripe for rebellion.” Among textile workers, whose national strike in 1934 saw mill towns in the South and in New England galvanized as the ranks of unionism in this sector exploded from 27,500 in 1932 to 270,000 two years later, a “powder train of strikes flashed through ... astonished” communities. Thousands of picketers, “moving with the speed and force of a mechanized army,” descended on factories, demanded they be closed, and engaged in pitched battle with National Guardsmen, police, or local militia forces. Amidst declarations of martial law, and shocked indignation at the defiance of conventional understandings of gender norms arising from the evident role of picketing women in “egging on the men” to acts of sometimes violent resistance, the flying squadrons were both unprecedented and threatening.

Powerful elites were perplexed and afraid as the usual boundaries of class struggle, so often patrolled by the trade union tops, seemed about to be broken open. The *New York Times* worried in September 1934 that, “the growing mass character of the picketing operations,” with their “motor cavalcades and their surprise descent on point after point” was “something entirely new in the history of American labor struggles.” In the face of a mobile, increasingly guerrilla-like, class war, not only was “adequate preparation by mill owners or local authorities” impossible, but “The grave danger of the situation is that it will get completely out of the hands of the leaders.” The flying squadrons of rank-and-file militants who struck the dagger of fear in the bosom of bourgeois power had no taste for the “miniature feudal state” that non-union factories and company towns resembled. These young rebels knew little of the damper of defeat that had quieted their elders over the course of the 1920s; nor were they easily drawn into campaigns of xenophobic repression or instinctually accepting of the irrational association of “aliens” and “Bolsheviks” that blanketed their parents’ generational experience of World War I and the post-war reconstruction years. They proved to be quick off the mark when a slight upturn in the 1933–34 economy offered them a small window of opportunity to register their protests

in the climate of an early New Deal hope for workers' advance that would soon prove rather hollow.

The working-class rebels of 1933–34 thus resisted unbridled autocracy. Raw corporate power and its abuses registered most visibly in enclaves of authoritarian class relations like the mill towns of Rhode Island or South Carolina. In such settings, wage cuts or *de facto* intensification of labor through the notorious “stretch-out,” whereby workers once required to handle a set number of production devices, such as spindles, were arbitrarily expected to take on responsibility for more of the technological units of output, were brutal reminders of who held the whip hand in class relations. In many of the 1933–34 strikes, wages and hours were less important than other, often symbolic, markers of class oppression.

Strikers fought for the democratization of the workplace and the realization of civil liberties. This vague, but powerfully mobilizing package of rights seemed overdue. It was both part of a working-class quest to truly become American *and* indistinguishable from planting the standard of trade unionism on territory where its previous roots had been weak or non-existent. The rowdy contingent of second generation immigrant youth that often proved the ballast of class struggle was complemented by a smaller cohort of experienced, older radicals, many of whom were pivotally placed in the bottlenecks of production as skilled craftsmen or maintenance technicians. In addition to the mass of foot soldiers and strategically-placed veterans of labor-capital conflict, the landscape of industrial and resource extractive settings in the United States was dotted with dissidents from a now highly variegated Left-wing. Communists were but the most numerous of the small but often influential bands of revolutionary cadre eager to raise loud voices against capitalist exploitation. The result was that 1933–34 proved a volatile prelude to the consolidation of industrial unionism in the 1937–48 years. Creative strike tactics, in which “flying pickets” were simply the most visible, effective and imaginative articulation of the infectious nature of mass struggle, lent the battles of the early 1930s an air of determined solidarity.⁸

8 The above paragraphs draw on many sources. See, as examples only, Bernstein, *Lean Years*, 217–317; Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Primer, 1974), 189–219; Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working-Class Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 236–237; James Green, “Working Class Militancy in the Great Depression,” *Radical America*, 6 (1972), 3–13; Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream*, 55–59; Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 33–34; Stephen Meyer, ‘*Stalin Over Wisconsin: The Making and Unmaking of Militant Unionism, 1900–1950*’ (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 38–62; Staughton Lynd, ed., *We Are All Leaders: The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996). For a brilliantly suggestive case study of the

Struggles at the point of production and the drumbeat of unemployed marches, protest rallies, and widening rural discontent with farm failures and foreclosures necessarily rekindled the fires of third partyism. To be sure, Roosevelt's New Dealish rhetoric and the facades of reform that it nurtured, revitalized the Democratic Party. So deep was the river of discontent running in 1933–34, however, that it was impossible to stem the tide of political alternative that surfaced in long-standing hotspots of farmer-labor party initiative. The irony, of course, was that the closer third party developments came to actually constituting a political alternative to the Democrats and the Republicans, the more decisive was the movement to reintegrate the mavericks into the mainstream, a process of incorporation in which progressive trade union officials played a decisive role.

In Minnesota 1934 saw important stirrings of an ostensibly radical Farmer-Labor Party that would elect a governor and two United States senators. "Left coast" states like Oregon and Washington emulated their Canadian British Columbia neighbors in the creation of labor-based Commonwealth Federations while, further south, in California, Upton Sinclair's EPIC movement championed wealth redistribution. Robert M. La Follette, Jr., who would come to see a third party as inevitable, spearheaded developments in Wisconsin, where the Progressive Party emerged out of the cross-currents of dissident republicanism, farmer-laborite sympathies, and disgruntled New Dealers and socialists. Labor Party mobilizations at the grass roots early fueled what eventually would be channeled into Non-Partisan League and American Labor Party developments of the later 1930s, as Congress of Industrial Organizations figureheads such as John L. Lewis and Sidney Hillman directed discontent into 1936 support for Roosevelt's flagging New Deal. The third partyism embraced by hundreds of thousands of Americans in 1934 did not die. Yet it was always deferred and deflected by its most visible and public proponents. Polls taken in 1936–37 indicated that 18–21 percent of voters would join a new Farmer-Labor Party. Ostensible leaders of the movement in formation, including Fiorello La Guardia, who owed his New York mayoralty victory to 500,000 American Labor Party votes, and Acting Minnesota Governor Hjalmar Petersen, warned, in 1936, that a national Farmer-Labor Party was in the making. The time for its realization, however, always seemed to be a development of the future. In the immediacy of the moment, especially among seemingly progressive trade

alliance of second generation immigrants and a small cohort of committed unionists whose skill and freedom of movement throughout an auto parts plant culminated in the formation of a union see Peter Friedlander, *The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936–1939: A Study in Class and Culture* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975).

union leaders, like the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union [ILGWU] head David Dubinsky, the third party's hour of arrival was always postponed.

The radical third partyism of 1933–34, like the rank-and-file workplace militancy of the same period, was thus incorporated into the more liberal containments and constraints of 1936–37. At the point of production and the struggle for trade union recognition, the CIO's John L. Lewis struggled valiantly to ride the wave of militancy and working-class anger that successfully challenged corporate power. At the same time, Lewis and other trade union leaders bureaucratically cooled down the heated calls for general strikes and funneled the inherently radical exuberance of their industrial unionist base into pacific structures of institutional containment. It was of course difficult to limit the upheavals associated with the CIO's birth pangs in the momentous strike wave of 1936–37. This eruption of class struggle saw epic battles in auto, steel, and rubber, involving, by the spring of 1937, some 400,000 workers staging almost 500 sit-downs. Lewis did his best to squash the tactic of plant occupations, but it was an uphill fight. Rallying militant workers to Roosevelt's flagging New Deal was the prior *political* incorporation that in some ways constrained labor's later 1930s dissidence, directing it in acceptable currents.⁹

The vehicle for this intriguing sleight of hand was Labor's Non-Partisan League, founded in April 1936 by Lewis, Hillman, and George L. Berry of the Printing Pressman's Union. Its sly message of implication was that by joining hands to re-elect Roosevelt and the Democrats in 1936, third party advocates could then come together in establishing a new progressive-radical political formation after the immediate threat to liberalism had been vanquished. Sidney Lens captures the drift of what happened to the nascent third party-

9 Note the brief comments on labor's uprising as well as "the labor party that never was" in Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream*, 55–69 and, on the polls indicating third party support Donald R. McCoy, *Angry Voices: Left-of-Center Politics in the New Deal Era* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1958), 160. See, as well, Max Lerner, "Third Party for 1940?" *Nation*, 4 September 1937, and for earlier regional developments note, for instance, Richard Neuberger, "The Northwest Goes Leftish," *New Republic*, 7 November 1934; Thomas R. Amlie, "The American Commonwealth Federation – What Chance in 1936?" *Common Sense*, March 1934; Harold M. Groves, "Wisconsin's New Party," *Nation*, 1 August 1934; David Dubinsky and A.H. Raskin, *David Dubinsky: A Life with Labor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 262–283; Mathew Josephson, *Sidney Hillman: Statesman of American Labor* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1952), 400–401, 454–455; and for Communist Party popular frontist capitulation to Roosevelt and abandonment of labor party possibilities in this period see Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1934), 186–206. On sit-downs see Brecher, *Strike!* 219–266 and the detailed case study, Sidney Fine, *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936–1937* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1969).

ism of 1933–34, harnessed as it was to the trade union officialdom's support for Roosevelt and the Democratic Party. Lens notes that the ironically-named Labor Non-Partisan League spent almost "a million dollars and considerable energy" to resecure a Democratic presidency in 1936. Rallies, daily speakers, and radio broadcasts, national and local, shored up Roosevelt's support, while circulars and pamphlets praising the President blanketed urban wards. Ohio mounted almost 350 Non-Partisan League rallies, with industrial cities like Chicago mobilizing well over 100 forums dedicated to keeping the Presidency in the hands of the Democratic Party. As Lens concludes, "A total of 35,000 union officials were enlisted in the drive to keep Roosevelt in the White House."¹⁰

Victory for the Democrats secured, it was, not surprisingly, rather difficult to reboot the drive to a third party alternative.¹¹ LaFollette's attempt to kick-start a 1938 National Progressive Party failed to galvanize much support, including within labor and left circles. Like so many other farmer-labor third partyist initiatives, it extended the bridging two-class content of the traditional Farmer-Labor Party into a wider pitch for a politics that obscured the antagonisms of class interests in a mythical cross-class progressivism. In effect, this negated the entire political purpose of opposing the Democrats and the Republicans by laying claim to the illusory politics of unity that both mainstream parties also embraced. By 1940 the much-proclaimed third partyism of the early-to-mid 1930s largely receded from political view.¹²

None of this, of course, was discernible in the depths of the dog days, and the future course of American class struggle could not be predicted as Cannon and his Trotskyist comrades emerged from the difficult times of the early 1930s. But by 1933–34 the upturn in class struggle and the evident openings to the left in the politics of labor signaled new options and fresh possibilities for revolutionary initiatives and interventions. The International Left Opposition's realization that combating fascism's rise necessitated breaking decisively from the now thoroughly compromised Stalinist Communist International as *the* organizational center of revolutionary activism meant that recruiting from the ranks of the established Party now took a backseat to building a new Party. The fast

10 McCoy, *Angry Voices*, 106–107, 152–160; Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream*, 67; Josephson, *Sidney Hillman*, 400–401; Sidney Lens, *Left, Right, and Centre: Conflicting Forces in American Labor* (Hinsdale, IL: H. Regnery, 1949), 316; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 288–289, 304–305.

11 Eric Leif Davin, "The Very Last Hurrah? The Defeat of the Labor Party Idea, 1934–1936," in Lynd, ed., *We Are All Leaders*, 117–171.

12 Donald R. McCoy, "The National Progressives of America, 1938," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 44 (June 1957), 75–93.

changing circumstances of 1933–34 pushed Cannon and his comrades more and more into the maelstrom of an intensifying United States class struggle. Many a roadblock still stood in the way of the CLA's mass actions and political influence. Not the least of these barriers was the ongoing hostility and growth of the established Communist Party, whose American ranks almost doubled from 14,000 to 27,000 in 1933–35.¹³ Nonetheless, the dog days were over and, looking into the daylight of 1933–34, Cannon's spirits were definitely lifted. "This was the time for action on ... principles," he recalled, "this was the time to be right on top of things, to take advantage of every opportunity presented by the new developments in ... other organizations and movements. ... Our ranks were infused in those days with new hopes and with great, high ambitions. ... We were sure that the future belonged to us."¹⁴

One part of this new sense of possibility was that as bad as the dog days were, they gave rise to departures in understanding, if not decisive formulations, on two fronts. Such rethinking was critically important to the Communist League of America as it re-entered the arm-twisting of class struggle in ways that distinguished it from the Communist Party. Disfiguring as the clique factionalism of 1930–33 was, and as much as it held back the unequivocal forward movement of the CLA, it actually forced a reconsideration of two areas of strategic importance to revolutionary politics in the particular context of the United States. How to relate to the issue of a labor party in America and how to undertake revolutionary work among African-Americans were, arguably, two of the most central, and most complicated, questions in the history of the Workers (Communist) Party of the 1920s. Advances in understanding on both fronts were registered by the CLA as of 1933. By no means, however, were the riddles of theory and practice obfuscating these pivotal areas resolved.

3 The Long and Trying March *Back* to a Labor Party Perspective

The issue of the labor party, and in particular the confusions that swirled around understanding of this issue when it was framed within discussions of what relations communists should have with farmer-labor party initiat-

13 On membership figures for the Communist Party for this period see Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream*, 57, drawing on Nathan Glazer, *The Social Basis of American Communism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1961). The standard account of the Communist Party in this period is Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism*.

14 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 116–117.

ives, vexed the Workers (Communist) Party throughout the 1920s.¹⁵ Trotsky's generalized 1924 criticism of the Comintern's illusory promotion of an idealized "Peasant's International," exaggerating the struggles of the landed masses against the bourgeoisie, was an important brake on the twinned folly of adventurist and opportunistic policies on the part of United States Communists. The particular singling out by Trotsky of the John Pepper-orchestrated Workers (Communist) Party support for the third partyism of Republican senator, Robert M. LaFollette, educated Cannon and others on the mistaken promotion of a two-class Farmer-Labor Party that would have obscured rather than enlightened American workers on the fundamental causes of their exploitation.¹⁶ Valuable lessons were learned, prompting Cannon to write in 1929 of "the heavy debt our Party owes to Trotsky."¹⁷

Pepper, whom Trotsky regarded as a central figure in the Communist International's rising tide of 1923–24 ultra-leftism, an irresponsible adventurer given to toying with Marxism and "one of those who slit the throat of the revolution in Hungary," battled Cannon in these years within the American Party. His wild theses, promoted as theorizing, extolled the "LaFollette revolution of the well-to-do and exploited farmers, small businessmen, and workers." Pepper suggested that in the Communist-created Federated Farmer-Labor Party lay the initial stage of an unfolding American Revolution that would contain "elements of the great French Revolution, and the Russian Kerensky Revolution. In its ideology it will have elements of Jeffersonianism, Danish cooperatives, Ku Klux Klan and Bolshevism. The Proletariat as a *class* will not play an independent role in this revolution." With the victory of third partyism, however, "there

15 The best recent detailed discussion is Jacob Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919–1929* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 112–151. See also James P. Cannon and the *Early Years of American Communism: Selected Writings and Speeches, 1920–1928* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 1992); Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 177–188, 222–240; David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 434–437; Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History (1919–1957)* (Boston: Beacon Hill, 1957), 112–139.

16 See, for instance, Vincent Ray Dunne, "The Minnesota F.L.P.: Six Years of Confusion and Disappointment in a Two-Class Party," *The Militant*, 18 January 1930.

17 Trotsky's criticisms of Zinoviev's Comintern, Pepper's proposals in the United States, and the two-class nature of the LaFollette movement can be found in Leon Trotsky, "Author's 1924 Introduction," *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Volume 1 (New York: Monad Press, 1972), esp. 12–14; Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 119–123. See Cannon, "Introduction," in Trotsky, *Draft Program of the Communist International*, ix.

will begin the *independent* role of workers and exploited farmers, and there will begin then ... the period of the proletarian revolution.”¹⁸

Cannon commented directly on Trotsky’s important role in challenging the American Party’s drift to LaFollettism in the early-to-mid 1920s, exposing “the underlying falsity of the whole idea of a ‘two class’ party.” Like Trotsky, Cannon rejected the “exaggerated hopes and unbounded mistakes” wrapped up in Pepper’s approach to the labor party, premised as it was on an opportunistic appetite for the quick fix that would allow Communists to hurdle over the hard work necessary in building the political institutions capable of transforming class relations in the United States.¹⁹ Trotsky concluded in 1923–24 that, “For a young and weak Communist Party, lacking in revolutionary temper, to play the role of solicitor and gatherer of ‘progressive voters’ for the Republican Senator LaFollette is to head toward the political dissolution of the party in the petty bourgeoisie.”²⁰ The labor party question in the United States was thus impaled on the horns of a series of dilemmas: was there mass support for a labor party? was it appropriate for Communists to play a role in calling for a labor party or should they actually exercise a central role in building that labor party? what was the class content of third partyism? and how could Communists negotiate their relations with a third party when they themselves were claiming to be the vanguard of revolution?

These and other questions guided Cannon’s original 1929 formulation of the CLA’s perspective on the labor party, which was framed within an understanding that the American Left Opposition was an external faction of the Communist Party. This perspective was also articulated at a time when “the movement for a Labor Party [was] ... at low ebb.” Cannon anticipated, in 1929, that developing class struggles would revive the idea of a labor party in the United States, as they did by 1934–37.²¹ Once this happened, the perspective of the Communist Party and its Left Opposition necessarily had to be that the formation of a labor party would constitute a “primary step in the political development of the American workers.” For the CLA, support for a labor party’s formation was dependent on such a third party being, in actuality, a class party, as opposed to a cross-class unity of farmers, workers, and others. Such a labor party would have a mass base constituted in ongoing class struggles but, espe-

18 John Pepper, “Facing the Third American Revolution,” *The Liberator* (September 1923), 9–12.

19 Cannon, “Introduction,” in Trotsky, *Draft Program of the Communist International*, ix.

20 Trotsky, “Author’s 1924 Introduction,” *First Five Years of the Communist International*, 1, 13.

21 See, for instance, *A Labor Party for the United States* (New York: Social Economic Foundation, 1936).

cially in its beginnings, might not have a disciplined animosity to revolutionary communists. Left Opposition endorsement would move carefully from a propagandistic call through agitation into active involvement, depending on the specific context in which workers were rallying to the labor party standard. Throughout all of this there was no possibility of the Communist Party and its Left Opposition substituting themselves for a fictional mass labor party base, as Pepper and others had been wont to do in the 1920s. Nor should the labor party ever be championed as the leader of working-class liberation, which was the task of the Communist Party. Finally, the labor party in formation involved an intransigent communist struggle against trade union officialdoms and reformist political agents. Such non-revolutionary figures would inevitably thwart the development of the kind of independent working-class political activism that communists in the labor party movement would strive to promote and extend.

For Left Oppositionists, then, as Cannon conceived the issue in 1929, the labor party was potentially an opportunity, born of revived class struggle and widening radicalization, to intervene directly and effectively among workers in order to enhance and extend the independent revolutionary leadership of the masses by the Communist Party. But this perspective could also veer in the direction of calling for and supporting a reformist party, even suggesting that this kind of political vehicle was a necessary stage through which the American working class would have to pass.²²

Cannon's perspective on the labor party in 1929 was useful because it posed the question of a third party in terms of principles that needed to be upheld. At the same time, the Left Opposition's relation to the labor party was a tactical matter, situated within a particular context. The early CLA addressed central issues of the class nature of any labor party formation as well as the necessity of communists upholding the banner of the revolutionary party. The labor party, in Cannon's view, was for Left Oppositionists a subject of propaganda, agitation, and action, depending on how advanced the class struggle was. Revolutionary Marxists thus approached the question of the labor party in the United States according to the state of the mass movement of workers. If, in 1929, no such party was easily envisioned, this was not to say that, five years later, the situation could not have changed sufficiently to make the call for such a party a useful propagandistic rallying cry for masses of workers. The complication existed, at this point in the League's history, however, of just what balance of class forces revolutionaries would confront in their struggle in any labor party

22 James P. Cannon, Arne Swabeck, Martin Abern and Max Shachtman, "The Perspective of a Labor Party," in "Platform of the Communist Opposition," *The Militant*, 15 February 1929.

formation to have communist programmatic direction recognized rather than suppressed within third party circles.²³

Objections were raised almost immediately to the CLA adopting Cannon's drafted passage on "The Perspective of a Labor Party." Albert Glotzer led the critics, rallying Chicago branch members Nathan Gould and John Edwards to his skepticism about the revolutionary value of advocating a labor party. Glotzer and Cannon exchanged an April 1929 correspondence, at which point they were still on good terms with one another. It was clear that the young Chicago Left Oppositionist was not warming to Cannon's view that the labor party might yet emerge and signal positive developments in the American class struggle.²⁴

At the founding conference of the Communist League of America (Opposition) in May 1929, Cannon's views won over the majority of delegates. A minority opposed his perspective on the labor party, arguing a range of positions. Some took an extreme stand of refusing in principle any call for or involvement in a labor party, arguing that the United States working class did not necessarily need to pass through the reformist channel of a class-based but non-revolutionary third party. Others, less intransigent, suggested that while it would not pose a problem for the CLA to "participate in a mass labor party if it should" arise, it would be ill-advised to "work for its formation."²⁵ Such positions, in their origins, were almost certainly bred in the diseased bone of Workers (Communist) Party adventurism/opportunism, a bending of the stick of labor party perspective away from the unprincipled contortions that Pepper advanced and activated in the mid-1920s. These political pyrotechnics brought to an acrimonious end the Party's capacity to engage in mass work with radical but non-revolutionary trade unionists like Chicago's John Fitzpatrick.²⁶

23 George Breitman offers a brief comment on Cannon's 1929 labor party formulations in "The Liberating Influence of the Transitional Program: Three Talks," in George Breitman, Paul Le Blanc, and Alan Wald, *Trotskyism in the United States: Historical Essays and Recon-siderations* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), 120.

24 Cannon to Glotzer, "Differences on the Labor Party and Self-Determination," 20 April 1929, in Fred Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928-1931: The Left Opposition in the U.S., 1928-1931* (New York: Monad Press, 1981), 162-163; *Dog Days: James P. Cannon vs. Max Shachtman in the Communist League of America* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 2002), 38; Nathan Gould to Hugo Oehler, 25 October 1932, Reel 20, James P. Cannon Papers, Archives, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, MD 92-175, Madison, Wisconsin [hereafter JPC Papers].

25 Cannon et al., "Platform of the Communist Opposition," *The Militant*, 15 February 1929; Cannon, "Conference of the Opposition Communists: Formation of the Communist League of America (Opposition)," *The Militant*, 1 June 1929.

26 See, for instance, Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary*

Shachtman, reaching to displace Cannon, was perhaps quick to see in his mentor's 1929 position on the labor party an echo of the compromised farmer-labor-party positions and practices in the Workers (Communist) Party of earlier years. However mechanical these oppositional anti-Cannon formulations were, Trotsky was conditioned by past American developments to receive them rather uncritically, perhaps even naively. As a consequence, Shachtman's resistance to Cannon and the labor party hardened simultaneously. While he took no immediate and leading 1929 stand against the labor party, by 1931–32 Shachtman stiffened in his repudiations, pushed in this oppositional direction by his worsening relations with Cannon and by his sense that on the labor party issue he apparently shared some common ground with Trotsky. The latter found it difficult to separate out his general conception of the labor party issue in the United States from the distasteful fact that his introduction to the subject involved debates with the likes of John Pepper. Pepper's Comintern pronouncements that “the revolution [in the United States] would come about by winning over the revolutionary farmers, allying the Communist Party with the petty bourgeoisie and neutralizing the working class!” obviously still rankled the Left Opposition leader. In this context, Trotsky's discussions with Shachtman tended to stress one side of the labor party question in the United States: “It is nowhere written, and theoretically it can not be substantiated, that the American workers will perforce have to pass through the school of reformism for a long time. ... That is, the stage of a labor party ... is by no means *inevitable*.” This position was also pressed, not surprisingly, by the anti-Cannon New York youth leader, Joseph Carter, who claimed that in propagandizing for and/or actively contributing to the development of a labor party, the American Left Opposition was indistinguishable from the Lovestoneites. Carter also championed dropping all reference to “the Cannon group” as the precursor of the CLA. “The abandonment of the above position on the future of reformism in the United States,” Carter wrote in a pre-conference discussion article in *The Militant* advocating the shift away from the original 1929 perspective on the labor party, “marks an important departure from that group's position.”

Cannon understandably reacted to what he felt were misrepresentations of Party history, and he and Swaback continued to press their labor party perspective of possible principled advocacy and involvement. They of course posed it

Left, esp. 222–240; James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 99, 123–125, 136–149, this book also having much on Fitzpatrick; and the extensive discussion of labor party/third party alliance issues in *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism: Selected Writings and Speeches, 1920–1928* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 1992).

against the Third Period sectarianism of the Communist Party, which abhorred any contact with the reformist leaders of “social fascism” and thus eschewed use of the labor party slogan or involvement in any labor party movement. But Cannon and Swabeck, sensing from allies like Hugo Oehler that the tide on this issue was running away from their views, shied away from any position that appeared to dig in its heels on the labor party question. Instead, they stressed the need to expand the League’s work in relation to the established Communist Party and in non-party mass organizations, proletarianize and professionalize the ranks of the Left Opposition, tighten its discipline, and thus consolidate the CLA on a firmer, more Bolshevik, foundation.

Shachtman, in contrast, agitated within the CLA to drop the Left Opposition’s approach to the labor party and its possibilities. Instead, like Carter, he urged “throwing overboard” all of the adventurist/opportunist baggage that accompanied American communism’s troubled relations with farmer-labor third partyism, which was invariably confused with the related labor party question per se. Pressing Trotsky to see what he presented as the flaw in Cannon’s original 1929 CLA platform formulation of the issue, Shachtman succeeded, by the time of the second 1931 national conference of the League, in winning the American Left Opposition to the view that, “The American Communists cannot undertake to organize a petty bourgeois workers’ party ‘standing between’ the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. ... The Left Opposition in its formative stage, leaned in the direction of this reformist perspective, which constituted to a certain extent an uncritical carryover of the preceding struggle in the Party, prior to the time when the left wing took shape and was established as a political grouping distinct from all the others in the movement.” Shachtman and his factional allies thus presented their shift on the labor party perspective as a struggle against the residue of the Workers (Communist) Party experience, and, in particular, the Cannon group’s place within that tainted history. “In order to develop our present position on so important a question as the labor party,” wrote Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer in their 1932 document, “The Situation in the American Opposition: Prospect and Retrospect,” “we have had to relinquish entirely the standpoint of the Cannon group on this point, which constituted the core of its platform even after the formation of the Left Opposition.”²⁷

27 The above paragraphs draw on Trotsky, “Discussions with Max Shachtman,” March 1930, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement 1, 1929–1933*, 28–29; “Thesis for the Pre-Conference Discussion,” *The Militant*, 25 July 1931; S.M. Rose, “Discussion Articles: The Party and the Opposition’s Tasks,” *The Militant*, 1 August 1931; 15 August 1931; Hugo Oehler, “Social Reformism and a Labor Party,” *The Militant*, 29 August 1931; Joseph Carter, “Discussion

Cannon, battered by his CLA factional opponents on the labor party question, and faced with Trotsky's early echoing of Shachtman's "doubts on the slogan of the labor party," shifted his perspective in subtle recognition of the overwhelming nature of the problems surrounding a communist approach to the labor party in the United States of the early 1930s. He understood all too well the necessity of avoiding opportunistic descent into the kinds of cross-class farmer-laborite panaceas that had so bedeviled American Communism in the 1920s. Cannon was quick to align with Shachtman and others to nip such developments in the bud if they seemed to be emerging in the ranks of the Left Opposition. This was precisely what had occurred in 1930, when the Minneapolis branch was momentarily disoriented by Tom O'Flaherty's short-lived Plentywood-based Farmer-Labor Party initiative that blurred fundamental class and political lines. Trotsky's contribution to the American discussion of the labor party in 1932 contained elements of argument from both the Cannon and Shachtman positions. The dialogue, posed before the mass upheavals of the American working class in 1934 and thus abstracted from the actual development of the class struggle, while always nuanced and two-sided, was persistently interpreted and presented by Shachtman one-dimensionally and in a way that routinized a negative and mechanical perspective on the labor party.

This stood diametrically opposed to the Cannon-Swabeck understanding of the issue, which retained a sense that in the United States the working class might experience the formation of a labor party as an important transitional process:

The Communists must remain in the most intimate contact possible with the working masses in all their experiences and struggles in order to help draw the proper lessons and lead the fight against the reactionar-

Articles: Some Shortcomings of the Thesis," *The Militant*, 5 September 1931; James P. Cannon, "Discussion Articles: A Reply to the Discussion," *The Militant*, 12 September 1931; James P. Cannon, "Discussion Articles: Tasks of Our National Conference," *The Militant*, 19 September 1931; Abern, Glotzer, and Shachtman, "The Situation in the American Opposition: Prospect and Retrospect," 4 June 1932, *Dog Days*, 253–255, as well as the discussion of Shachtman's position in the introduction, 38–40; Trotsky to the Editorial Board of the *Militant*, "Prospects of the Communist League of America," 26 March 1930, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement 1, 1929–1933*, 31–32; and the brief commentary in Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialist's Odyssey through the 'American Century'* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), 57, 70. See also Breitman, "The Liberating Influence of the Transitional Program," in Breitman, Le Blanc, and Wald., eds., *Trotskyism in the United States*, 120–125.

ies; to proudly unfurl the revolutionary banner of Communism through the labor reformist stage and through the labor party, from within and without; utilize all means and most speedily to help elevate the American working class to its final revolutionary position.

What was lost in the wooden translation of Trotsky's perspective to America by Shachtman and others was what would later, in 1938, resurface.

As early as June 1930, Trotsky wrote to Shachtman: "It goes without saying that a labor party, if it has a definite, independent program – independent with respect to communism – is the tool of another class, although it is based on the working masses. Organizational mergers between the CP and such a party are as much out of the question as, let us say, merger with the German Social Democracy. But it is possible that there are or will arise transitional formations which encompass the working masses but have no definite program and no corresponding discipline and hence leave open the possibility of organizational but, in any case, temporary ties. Of course, the objective conditions and the characteristics of the labor party in question as well as the nature of the organizational ties must be concretely investigated and determined." Such a perspective was not decisively counterposed to positions being put forward by Cannon and Swabeck, but was at times congruent with them. With signs of an upturn in class struggle in the early 1930s, Cannon's handwritten notes for an internal discussion arising out of the intensification of factionalism in the CLA declared the labor party issue a timely and open question. As early as 1933 Cannon nudged Trotsky on the labor party question, writing to him about the importance of the issue in the context of regroupment initiatives involving a Benjamin Gitlow-led split from Lovestone's Communist Party (Opposition). Trotsky's tactical suppleness in addressing the labor party question in the United States was nonetheless destined to be lost for a time in the fog of factional animosity.²⁸

28 The above paragraphs draw on numerous sources: "On the Proposal for a New Farmer-Labor Party Fraud: Against Opportunism and Adventurism of the Right Wing," *The Militant*, 1 November 1930; Communist League of America, National Executive Committee, Minutes, 2 February 1931; 3 July 1931, Box 35, Folder 5, George Breitman Papers, Tamiment Institute, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter GB Papers]; *Dog Days*, 53. Plentywood's context is outlined in Verlaine Stoner McDonald, *Red Corner: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Northeastern Montana* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2010). For the Cannon-Swabeck position see Swabeck, "The Labor Party and the Tasks of the Communists," *The Militant*, 29 March 1930. Note as well, Cannon, handwritten notes accompanying typescript, "The Internal Crisis of the American League," and headed "Mass Work," dated [1932–1933 re Weisbord], in "Speeches and Writings, 1932–1933," Box

Shachtman, Glotzer, Carter and others insisted on framing the 1930s Left Opposition debate over the labor party in terms of the Cannon group's origins in the Workers (Communist) Party. They in effect opted out of what could have been an important component of the struggles of the American working class. In claiming that virtually *any* position involving revolutionaries in a labor party was necessarily compromised by the imbroglio of adventurism/opportunism that characterized the Pepper approach of the 1920s, Shachtman and Company closed a sectarian door on too many political possibilities. Trotsky's 1932 endorsement of the CLA's revision of its 1929 perspective on the labor party that unfolded at the League's second national conference in 1931 stated clearly that under certain conditions the creation of an American labor party would necessarily be a progressive step forward. He also noted that if conditions brought into being a labor party in the United States, Left Opposition participation in and utilization of that party "would be greater in the period of its inception, that is, in the period when the party is not a party, but an amorphous political mass movement." In such a situation, Trotsky stressed, revolutionaries had no choice but to work in the ongoing mobilizations, "not to form a labor party which will exclude us and fight against us, but to push the progressive elements more and more to the left by our activity and propaganda." This stricture, he knew, would seem "too simple for the great new school which searches everywhere to jump over its feeble head." These words were framed within warnings and caveats, overdetermined as it were by American Communism's past.

George Breitman, an influential later figure in the history of American Trotskyism, a member of the Socialist Workers Party's National Committee from 1939 and an editor of *The Militant* throughout the 1940s, joined the ranks of American Trotskyism in the mid-1930s. He had no appreciation of the original Cannonesque formulation of the Left Opposition perspective on the labor

27/ Reel 33, JPC Papers. Cannon's 1933 nudge appears in Cannon to Trotsky, "Initial Discussions on Forming the New Party," 25 September 1933, in Fred Stanton and Michael Taber, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932-1934: The Communist League of America, 1932-1934* (New York: Monad, 1985), 270-272. On the Gitlow split from the Lovestone group see Robert J. Alexander, *The Right Opposition: The Lovestoneites and the International Communist Opposition of the 1930s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1981), 64-67. For Trotsky's two-sided, but definitely abstract and historically-conditioned, views on the labor party in the United States, see Trotsky, "Discussions with Max Shachtman," March 1930; Trotsky to Shachtman, "Bureaucratic Tendencies," 20 June 1930; Trotsky to Glotzer, "The American Dispute and International Questions," 1 May 1932; Trotsky to the CLA, National Committee, "International and National Questions," 19 May 1932, all in *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement 1, 1929-1933*, 24-29, 42-44, 111-112, 113-114; Leon Trotsky, "The Labor Party Question in the United States," *The Militant*, 11 June 1932, also in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1932]*, 94-97.

party question. Instead, Breitman was schooled in the view that it was dubious at best to call for the formation of a labor party, let alone to actively work towards the creation of such a reformist body. It was impossible for many in the factionalized CLA not to be drawn into the highly negative understanding of the whole labor party issue that had been promoted by Glotzer, Shachtman, and others, all the more so as it was linked, almost organically, to Cannon's flawed past. When Trotsky spoke of Comintern "confusion" or of the "important rehearsal of a labor or farmer-labor party" in the United States in 1921–24, in which "the Communist Party did not find great possibilities," there were undoubtedly heads nodding knowingly in CLA circles. Those same heads rocked as they read Trotsky to say that the invincibility of communist ideas necessitated understanding that "all roads of opportunism" must be shunned: there was much in the experience of American farmer-laborism that had proven "a treacherous mockery of Marxism."

So strident was the chorus of labor party nay-saying in 1932 that Shachtman even backed Trotsky into a particular corner, questioning a vaguely worded interview on American questions that appeared in the *New York Times*. Trotsky referred to the inevitability of the so-called Europeanization of politics in the United States with respect to the emergence of "a party of the working class." Shachtman wrote to Trotsky to suggest that this wording was creating confusion in the United States, where other tendencies were now quoting Trotsky as claiming that a labor party was inevitable in America. This Trotsky denied saying. All he meant to convey was that the class struggle would inevitably throw into heightened relief some kind of workers' organization – whether this would be a Communist, social democratic, or labor party he did not stipulate. It was in this context that Trotsky wrote his endorsement of the revised early 1930s CLA perspective on the labor party, reinforcing the view that in the United States such a political formation was not inevitable. Glotzer, Shachtman, and others had yet another round of ammunition to fire at those who adhered to a more complex understanding of what was at stake in the Left Opposition perspective. As Breitman later reflected, in took young recruits to Trotskyism a number of years to find their way out of the sectarian fall-out of the early 1930s attack on Cannon's labor party position. If advocating a labor party necessitated negotiating a political minefield, in which much could blow up in a revolutionary's face, Breitman came to appreciate, as did Cannon, that the "mere possibility" of "retrogressive things" happening must not dictate that those whose priority is to build a communist party "abstain from what can be a fruitful tactic."²⁹

29 The above paragraphs draw on "Trotsky on the Labor Party Question," *The Militant*, 11 June

When the tide of class struggle turned in 1934, Cannon urged paying serious attention “to the problems arising in connection with the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party,” adding that present trends indicated “a national labor party organized by the trade unions is not out of the question.” But the deeply entrenched anti-labor party position of American Trotskyists in the mid-1930s was difficult to dislodge. A sectarian insistence that Cannon’s origins in the Workers (Communist) Party and its history of inept intervention in third party initiatives had to be broken from decisively translated, in Shachtman’s ongoing opposition to address the labor party issue sensitively, into an historical pessimism about the American working-class capacity to break from its attachments to the mainstream Republican and Democratic Parties. An opportunity for Left Oppositionists to intercede in the somewhat malleable political climate of 1934–37 third partyism was lost. The development of an independent vehicle of working-class politics distinct from the two mainstream parties but pushed by revolutionary intervention away from the compromised misleadership of all manner of organized political protest thrown up in the social upheavals of the mid-1930s came to naught. Not until 1938, when Cannon and Vincent Ray Dunne influenced Trotsky to revive the call for a labor party as part of a set of transitional demands that could advance the prospects of class politics, did Shachtman finally begrudgingly abandon his opposition to the original 1929 perspective of Cannon and Swabeck. Indeed, it can be argued that Cannon *anticipated aspects* of the labor party perspective that Trotsky would eventually arrive at and refine in 1938, and he had done so as early as 1929. The Shachtman-Glotzer opposition to Cannon’s position, reinforced by the subtle but nonetheless skeptical nature of Trotsky’s advice, forced the original Cannon-authored CLA perspective on the labor party into retreat. By 1938, when it would finally be resurrected in the face of a massive mobilization of the United States working class, the propagandistic value of calling for independent working-class political action through the demand for the formation of a labor party had been lost. The initiative, conceded to the pro-Roosevelt charades of the likes of Lewis, Dubinsky, and Hillman and the so-called Labor Non-Partisanship League on the one hand, and popular frontist Communist Party accommodations, on the other, sank the genuine mass appeal of a labor party on the reefs of class com-

1932; Trotsky, “The Labor Party Question in the United States”; Trotsky to Glotzer, “The American Dispute and International Questions,” 1 May 1932 and Trotsky to the CLA, National Committee, “International and National Questions,” 19 May 1932, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement 1, 1929–1933*, 111–114; Breitman, “The Liberating Influence of the Transitional Program,” 120–125.

promise. There the capsized United States labor party vessel was destined to sink so far from view that it would prove exceedingly difficult to salvage.³⁰

- 30 Cannon's remarks on the labor party in 1934 are in Communist League of America, National Committee Minutes, 24 September 1934, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers. It is commonplace to stress that it was Trotsky's initiative in 1938 that reconfigured American Trotskyism's orientation to the labor party question. This is stated baldly in Stanton and Taber, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 423, and is implied in Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 70. The brief discussion in Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 813–814, is more nuanced, but still commences with the statement that the change in labor party perspective came “largely on the basis of Trotsky's urging.” Certainly Trotsky altered his views in light of the labor upheaval associated with the CIO, among other changing circumstances, in the United States. But conversations with Trotsky in Mexico in 1938 involving Cannon, Vincent Ray Dunne, and Shachtman suggest that Cannon and Dunne pushed Trotsky to recognize the changed context of class struggle in the United States. They argued that there was mass support among workers for a labor party that made the situation in the mid-to-late 1930s different than that of 1924, and argued that among American Trotskyists the majority favored working energetically for the creation of a labor party and battling those forces – trade union bureaucrats and Communist Party popular frontists – diverting the class sentiment for a labor party into support for the Roosevelt Democrats. Shachtman at first resisted these arguments, as did much of the youth brigade of the American Left Opposition. Trotsky's contribution to shifting the perspective on the labor party within the American Left Opposition must be viewed in the context of Cannon's arguments and influence. To the extent that Trotsky articulated a generalized programmatic direction, spelled out in what became known as “The Transitional Program” and published in 1938 under the title, “The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International,” his changing orientation owed much to the specificities of Cannon's perspective on the labor party in the United States. Indeed, Trotsky wrote to Cannon on 15 April 1938: “We have sent you the transitional program draft and a short statement about the labor party. Without your visit to Mexico, I could never have written the program draft because I learned during the discussions many important things which permitted me to be more explicit and concrete.” Trotsky to Cannon, 15 April 1938, in Naomi Allen and George Breitman, eds., Leon Trotsky, *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1937–1938]* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1976), 317. Joseph Hansen and George Novack, introduced, Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), contains the discussions between Cannon, Trotsky, and others on the labor party and other related matters. When it proved difficult to transcend the anti-labor party thought cultivated by Shachtman and others over the course of the mid-1930s, Trotsky's insistence on the necessity of implementing the change was forceful. See Trotsky to Dear Friend, “Problems of the American Party,” 5 October 1938, in Naomi Allen and George Breitman, eds., *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1938–1939]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1974), 37–39. Note, as well, Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Politics* (New York: Monad, 1975). For a useful outline of the Trotskyist orientation to the Farmer-Labor Party, with particular reference to Minnesota, where Farmer-Laborism was well entrenched, see N. Dylan Boorman, “American Trotskyism and the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party from Origins to 1936,” MA thesis, San Francisco State, 2017. This unpublished work argues that in Minnesota the Trotskyists moved from a prin-

4 Black Oppression in America: National Self-Determination vs. The Revolutionary Struggle for Equality

If the Glotzer-Shachtman camp within the CLA muddled the labor party question waters in the early 1930s, their contribution to the Left Opposition's perspective on the central issue of race and revolution in the United States was decidedly more positive. Glotzer was probably the first to challenge both Cannon and Shachtman about the section of the League's platform, "Work Among Negroes," when it was first published in *The Militant* in February 1929. "The Negro section deserves a good discussion for clarification purposes," Glotzer wrote to Shachtman and, indeed, at the founding conference of the CLA a robust debate ensued.³¹

The brief passages Glotzer referred to relating to African Americans in the United States castigated Communists for having underestimated "the tremendous importance of revolutionary work among the Negro masses." The CLA's founding document stated that blacks – as part of the northern proletariat and a mass force in the South which the CLA designated "the Negro peasantry" – were "destined to play a great role in the coming revolution." What was needed was to break out of the confines of liberal paternalism, establishing policies and building mobilizations that would consolidate "the rights of the Negro masses to full social, economic, and political equality." Blacks needed to unite with white workers in comradely, common battle, doing so in ways that went well beyond the old American socialist movement's call for black and white to unite and fight. The CLA's platform statement advocated "persistent struggle against race prejudice," acknowledging that while this was "cultivated by the ruling class," it also "dominate[d] large sections of the white workers." A broad

cipléd position during the 1934 Teamster strikes of treating the Farmer-Labor Party as a class enemy to a collaborationist bloc with the FLP in 1935–36, suggesting an actual entry into the FLP that paralleled the Workers Party entry into the Socialist Party. Boorman presents Cannon and Dunne as of the view that the Minnesota FLP was "an exception to the rule" with respect to Farmer-Laborism as a party of class collaboration and suggests that their January 1936 correspondence constitutes the "only known documentation of the proposal to enter the Farmer-Labor Party." My reading of the correspondence cited in Boorman's important and provocative thesis, however, is that it may well have been premised on understandings of "joining" the FLP, and working "inside" it that constituted something less than a formal entry. This issue will be discussed below, in the chapter on entryism.

31 Glotzer to Shachtman, 16 March 1929, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers; also Cannon to Glotzer, 20 April 1929, Box 3, Folder 2, JPC Papers.

campaign that would relentlessly expose “white supremacy” and utilize concrete mobilizations to challenge its many manifestations, was championed.

Cannon, Shachtman and others noted that such a program of fighting racism had not yet been activated, and that mechanical methods had for too long been associated with Party endeavors in this field. They rejected, for instance, “the false slogan of a ‘Negro Soviet Republic in the South’ that had first been advanced by Pepper and that remained part of the discourse of official Communist propaganda and party literature in the United States,” an orientation that would be resurrected by the Party during the Third Period. Yet Cannon, Shachtman, and others situated “the Negro question” at the interface of class and national considerations:

The Negro question is also a national question, and the party must raise the slogan of the right of self-determination for the Negroes. The effectiveness of this slogan is enhanced by the fact that there are scores of contiguous counties in the South where the Negro population is the majority, and it is there that they suffer the most violent persecution and discrimination. This slogan will be the means especially of penetrating these Negro masses in the South and of mobilizing them for revolutionary struggle.

Such views were congruent with positions of Lenin, Trotsky, and early congresses of the Communist International.³² The paradox was that at the same time that Cannon put forward this position, he was also arguing that “work among the Negro masses must from the very beginning be based on leadership by the Negro proletariat and not by the Negro petty bourgeoisie.” If the struggle was indeed for black self-determination, as official Comintern policy suggested, and as Cannon had come to believe after listening to discussions of the “Black Belt Nation thesis” at the Sixth Congress in 1928, how could concrete mobilizations of the African American proletariat and landless tenant farmers/sharecroppers along class lines supersede the leadership of the nationalist petty bourgeoisie? As transparent as it was to Cannon and others that Pepper was a particular kind of adventurist/opportunist voice of Stalinism in America, whose demand for a “Negro Soviet Republic in the South” must be

32 Lenin, as early as 1916, saw blacks in the United States as “an oppressed nation.” But this claim, put forward in unpublished writing, was not likely to be known in the United States. See Paul Le Blanc, ed., *Revolution, Democracy, Socialism: Selected Writings of V.I. Lenin* (London: Pluto, 2008), 254. See also Michael Löwy, “Marxists and the National Question,” in Löwy, *On Changing the World: Essays in Political Philosophy from Karl Marx to Walter Benjamin* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2013), 68–72.

rejected, there was nonetheless a blurring of differing perspectives on self-determination for blacks. Little in the way of clarifications that might *explain* what separated the League's orientation to the struggle of African Americans and that of the Communist Party was present in the 1929 platform statement on "Work among Negroes." The CLA endorsed a generalized demand, couching its call for self-determination in language that vaguely echoed related Communist Party demands for the creation of a Black Belt Nation at the same time that it avoided any reference to the terminology codified at the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International.³³

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- 33 The above paragraphs draw on a variety of sources. The most accessible versions of the CLA platform statement, "Work Among Negroes," are Cannon, Swabeck, Abern, and Shachtman, "Platform of the Communist Opposition," 15–22 February 1929, in Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928–1931*, 107–108; and "Work among Negroes (1929)," in Paul Le Blanc, Bryan Palmer, Thomas Bias, and Andrew Pollack, eds., *US Trotskyism, 1928–1965 – Part I: Emergence – Left Opposition in the United States* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), 235–236, a text that also contains other documents relating to the Trotskyist movement's views on African Americans and self-determination in the 1930s. For the development of the Comintern position on the Black Belt Nation see Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: Viking Press, 1960), 315–356; Draper, *The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism* (New York: Viking, 1970), 63–66; Harvey Klehr and William Thompson, "Self-Determination in the Black Belt: Origins of a Communist Policy," *Labor History*, 30 (Summer 1989), 354–366; Oscar Berland, "The Communist Perspective on the 'Negro Question' in America, 1919–1931," *Science & Society*, 63 (Winter 1999–2000), 411–432; 64 (Summer 2000), 194–217; Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict, 1919–1990* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 43–58; Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917–1936* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998). Relevant documents appear in Philip S. Foner and Herbert Shapiro, eds., *American Communism and Black Americans: A Documentary History, 1930–1934* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 1–146. Also see the work of Jacob A. Zumoff, "The African Blood Brotherhood: From Caribbean Nationalism to Communism," *The Journal of Caribbean History*, 41 (Nos 1 & 2, 2007), 200–226; Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919–1928*, 287–364; and Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 216–219. Christopher Phelps, edited and introduced, "Introduction: Race and Revolution – A Lost Chapter in American Radicalism," in Max Shachtman, *Race and Revolution* (London and New York: Verso, 2003), xi–lxiii, is a critically important statement that grew out of Phelps' recovery of a pivotal CLA document. My own views are presented in detail in Bryan D. Palmer, "Race and Revolution," *Labour/Le Travail*, 54 (Fall 2004), 193–222. On Pepper's perspective in 1928 and later Third Period formulations see John Pepper, *American Negro Problems* (New York: Workers Library, 1928); Earl Browder, C.A. Hathaway, Harry Haywood, and the Communist International, *The Communist Position on the Negro Question: Equal Rights for Negroes – Self-Determination for the Black Belt* (New York: Workers Library, c. 1932); James S. Allen, *The American Negro* (New York: International, 1932); Allen, *Negro Liberation* (New York: International, 1932). Virtually any positions associated with Pepper were suspect to

Questions such as these no doubt troubled Glotzer, who noted that “we have adopted with open arms the policy of the Comintern on this question. ... In my opinion the stick has been bent back completely on this question.” Shachtman, always glib, replied that the thesis statement was written under great pressure, but it was nonetheless “the best document the Party has yet seen,” a position he would later repudiate, attributing the faults in the platform to Cannon. “As for the Negro work section,” he closed, “it is correct, and so is the Comintern. The thesis of the 2nd Congress recognized already that the Negro question in the U.S. is a national question in essential respects and the slogan of the right of self-determination is the key to the question in this country. Of course, we will have to discuss it at the conference.” Glotzer, who noted that he too was publicly praising the thesis document, was nevertheless not convinced: “I think that the negro questions merit a serious discussion. I am not ready to agree just because you say it is so – coming from Pike County (really Ivanik Minsker Gubernia), Missouri, I’ve got to be shown.” He was still of the view that in conceding too much to the Comintern position on “the Negro Question” the League has “broken it.”³⁴

The Communist International pushed its American section to more centrally address the significance and place of blacks in the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism throughout the 1920s. It called on United States Communists to develop demands and methods of work among the black population that would rally the African American masses to the cause of proletarian revolution, and to understand the place of special oppression and black emancipation in the general liberation of all working people. Historians have long acknowledged that the nascent American Communist movement, which had grown, in part, out of the revolutionary developments within a home-grown socialist milieu, too often adapted to the old Socialist Party’s inadequate understanding of the special features of racial oppression in the United States. Right-wing elements of the American Socialist Party espoused and embraced racist views. Even left-wingers, such as Eugene Debs, too easily collapsed (even repudiated) the need to wage struggles for social equality into other, seemingly larger,

Cannon. For background see Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, esp. 166–201; “Good-by Pepper! The Passing of an Adventurer,” *The Militant*, 1 October 1929. Shachtman and Glotzer were no more enamored of Pepper, whom the former referred to as “the Hot Hungarian.” See Shachtman to Glotzer, 20 March 1928, Reel 20, JPC Papers.

34 Shachtman to Glotzer, 1 April 1929, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Glotzer to Shachtman, 16 March 1929; 3 April 1929, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers.

mobilizations. Claiming that “the Negro Question” was nothing more than a “Labor Question,” figures like Debs tended to put forward positions that were easily interpreted as subordinating the struggle for racial equality to the ostensibly more important class struggle. While the argument that race and class were inextricably entwined, and there would be no resolution of racial oppression outside of the struggle against class exploitation under capitalism was undoubtedly right, such a wooden approach to African Americans inevitably meant that race was never really addressed in the immediacy of the particular oppression of blacks. Manifestations of racism outside of the narrowly economic realm tended to be regarded as of secondary importance. Spheres of everyday life, such as sexual relations, the pursuit of leisure, and the organization of housing, education, and the sociability networks of streets and neighborhoods, were important sites fostering racism and disfiguring class relations in the United States. But to address such matters within the old Socialist Party framework on the so-called “Negro Question,” which was of course a “White Question” as well, was well-nigh impossible, as black socialist critics such as Hubert Harrison discovered to their chagrin.

Too much of this carried into the early approach of the Workers Party. But there were cracks in the walls of racialized indifference. The Comintern both helped to create such fissures and widened them markedly, as J.A. (Jacob) Zumoff has recently argued. Communist International figures of stature prodded American revolutionaries to expand their conception of the struggle against racism. Lenin insisted, in 1920, that John Reed address the condition of African Americans at the Fourth Session of the Second Congress of the CI in July 1920. Reed did not get much beyond the old Socialist Party insistence that the black question was a class question. He managed, nonetheless, to raise pertinent issues of race consciousness, social inequality, and integration. This separated a communist approach to “the Negro Question” from both the current of black nationalism associated with Marcus Garvey and “the lie of bourgeois equality,” which had proven so hollow for African Americans:

The Negroes do not pose the demand of national independence. A movement that aims for a separate national existence, like for instance the ‘back to Africa’ movement that could be observed a few years ago, is never successful among the Negroes. They hold themselves above all to be Americans, they feel at home in the United States. ... The only correct policy for the American communists towards the Negroes is to regard them above all as workers. ... In both parts of the country we must strive to organize the Negroes in the same unions as whites. This is the best and quickest way to root out racial prejudice and awaken class solidarity.

There were, to be sure, those American communists who found Reed's discussion of black oppression, with its implied special features ("downtrodden people"), diversionary. Nevertheless, over the course of the 1920–24 years, the ground began to shift in subtle ways towards recognition of the need to address race and racism in the United States in new ways.

In 1922, the African American Claude McKay, then living in Moscow, delivered a blistering repudiation of communist and working-class failures on the race front. Following a speech at the Fourth Congress, McKay prepared a series of articles for the Soviet press. These were soon gathered into a short book destined not to be published in English until 1979, *Negroes in America*. McKay broadened the treatment of oppression to include commentary on lynching that addressed the relations of race/sexuality. Engaged in discussions with Trotsky, McKay asked the Bolshevik leader a number of questions. Trotsky replied at length, in the process insisting that the task of "enlightening the proletarian consciousness" in the United States could only be advanced by combating "the abominable obtuseness and caste presumption of the privileged upper strata of the white working class itself." Those committed to the class struggle in America, Trotsky argued, must be centrally concerned with "awakening the feeling of human dignity, and of revolutionary protest among the negro slaves of American capitalism," an undertaking he thought could only be "carried out by self-sacrificing and politically educated revolutionary Negroes."

Cannon, who established cordial and mutually-respectful relations with McKay while they were both in the Soviet Union at this time, was also reporting to the Executive Committee of the Communist International on class repression in the United States. He complemented accounts of strike suppression, prison sentences, deportation, and vigilantism with a specific outline of race lynching. Figures such as the African American Lovett Fort-Whiteman were, by 1924, voicing increasingly unambiguous claims that the Workers' Party (WP) was insufficiently attuned to the need to address discrimination against blacks in terms of special oppression. Fort-Whiteman spearheaded a call to form the American Negro Labor Congress. To the extent that advances registered in the United States Communist movement, however, they were handcuffed by the residue of the race blind spot that inhibited sectors of the WP, as well as the factionalism that was, by the mid-1920s, an ever-present barrier to the development of both Party unity and programmatic clarification. In the case of black communists, as I have suggested in an earlier study of Cannon, the historical development of the Workers' Party meant that this contingent was incorporated into the Ruthenberg/Lovestone/Robert Minor wing of American Communism. Still, as Cannon wrote in *The First Ten Years of American Communism*: "The Russians in the Comintern started on the American communists with the

harsh, insistent demand that they shake off their own unspoken prejudices, pay attention to the special problems and grievances of the American Negroes, go to work among them, and champion their cause in the white community. ... [T]he Russians followed up year after year, piling up the arguments and increasing the pressure on the American communists until they finally learned and changed, and went to work in earnest.”³⁵

Trotsky cautioned McKay in 1923 that communist approaches to “the Negro Question” “could not be carried on in a spirit of Negro chauvinism.” With the Stalinization of the Comintern well underway in the mid-to-late 1920s, its bureaucratization evident in many quarters, the reification of Stalin’s supposed theoretical contribution to Marxism and the question of nationalities was playing out.³⁶ Discussions of the particular course of black emancipation in the United States were increasingly charted so as to emphasize understanding African Americans as an oppressed *nation*, rather than as a

35 The above paragraphs draw on Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919–1928*, 287–364; and Jacob A. Zumoff, “Mulattoes, Reds, and the Fight for Black Liberation in Claude McKay’s *Trial by Lynching and Negroes in America*,” *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 19 (No. 1, 2010), 22–53; Claude McKay, *The Negroes in America*, translated Robert J. Winter, and edited by Alan L. McLeod (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1979); Jeffrey B. Perry, ed., *A Hubert Henry Harrison Reader* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001); Perry, *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883–1918* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Wayne F. Cooper, *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Schocken, 1990), 173–192; Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home* (New York: Lee Furman, 1937), 162, 178–179; Trotsky to McKay, 13 March 1923, in Leon Trotsky, *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Volume 2 (New York: Pathfinder, 1977), 354–356; Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 102–104; Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 212–219; James P. Cannon, “The Russian Revolution and the American Negro Movement,” in *The First Ten Years of American Communism – Report of a Participant* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1962), 234. John Reed quoted in John Riddell, ed., *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples Unite! Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920: The Communist International in Lenin’s Time*, Volume 1 (New York: Pathfinder, 1991), 224–228.

36 While not without analytic problems see the discussion in Erik van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: A Study in Twentieth-Century Revolutionary Patriotism* (London: Routledge, 2002). For a helpful discussion of Marx’s contribution to issues relating to nationalism and self-determination see Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919–1928*, 355–357 provides a useful discussion of Stalinization and self-determination, while Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, concluded that the “Stalinist origins” of the Black Belt Nation thesis were “unmistakable.” For a counter view see Leslie G. Carr, “The Origins of the Communist Party’s Theory of Black Self-Determination: Draper vs. Haywood,” *Critical Sociology*, 10 (No. 3, 1980), 35–49.

caste component of an exploited multiracial/multiethnic working class. By 1928, this view was put forward, drawing on the tentative and undeveloped draft theses Lenin presented to the Second Comintern Congress (1922) on the national question, but more self-consciously reliant on Stalin's *Marxism and the National Question* (1913). Blacks, who formed the majority of the population in a region of the American South historically devoted to cotton production, were seen as a nation with the right of self-determination. The common territory of this Black Belt Nation encompassed parts of twelve southern states, and reached from the southern border of Maryland into the Mississippi delta. African Americans constituted a population of some 5,000,000 in this region in 1930, and numbered a further 3,000,000 in adjacent territories. Only the self-determination of blacks in this southern region that had for so long existed within the vice-like grip of white supremacy, claimed Comintern advocates of the Black Belt Nation thesis, could guarantee African Americans equality. As Cannon later concluded, this slogan of "self-determination," "about which the most to-do was made and the most theses and resolutions were written ... never seemed to fit the actual situation." But it did correspond with a turn toward "aggressive agitation for *Negro equality and Negro rights on every front*. ... That's what the Negroes wanted to hear, and that's what made the difference. It was the CP's agitation and action under the *latter* slogan that brought the results, without the help, and probably despite, the unpopular 'self-determination' slogan and all the theses written to justify it."³⁷

The Black Belt Nation thesis never captured the support of leading African American communists, Harry Haywood excepted. Nor did it ever gain much endorsement among non-communist blacks.³⁸ Subsequent commentaries,

37 For an account of the historical development of the Black Belt Nation thesis by one of its few African American advocates see Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1978), 218–244 and Haywood's major statement, *Negro Liberation* (New York: International Publishers, 1948). The contentiousness of the Black Belt Nation position is alluded to in Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), esp. 31, 42–43, 122. See Trotsky to McKay, 13 March 1923, *First Five Years of the Communist International*, 354–356; Cannon, *First Ten Years*, 236–237.

38 Note Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: From its Origins to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), 140–143; Otto Huiswood, "World Aspects of the Negro Question," *The Communist*, February 1930, 132–147, an article polemicized against by Haywood, "Against Bourgeois Liberal Distortion of Leninism on the Negro Question in the United States," *The Communist*, August 1930, 694; Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (New York and London: Verso, 1998), 286; and sources cited in Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 464–465, n. 52.

with some notable exceptions, have generally agreed that Communist commitment to black self-determination and/or advocacy of a Black Belt Nation produced little in the way of positive, concrete results.³⁹ Cannon and his allies within the Workers (Communist) Party presented no immediate forceful critique of the Black Belt Nation thesis in 1928, and apparently saw no contradiction between its geographical identification of oppressed black nationality and endorsement of African American rights to self-determination.⁴⁰ If Pepper's pushing of the self-determination envelope caused Cannon, subsequently, to backtrack somewhat, there is no doubt that the first Left Opposition platform theses reproduced a perspective on revolutionary work among the African American masses that juggled uncertainly class and nationalist perspectives. In the context of the Communist International's evolving orientation to African Americans and class struggle, a generalized programmatic commitment to the right of black self-determination blurred into a problematic national approach to blacks in the United States that laid claim on a specific region. Associated territorially with the plantation regime of the nineteenth-century slave order and its deformed political economy, the Black Belt Nation thesis implicitly typecast black Americans in ways that fed directly into racist assumptions and essentialized understandings of innate *racial* characteristics. As Barbara Foley has argued in a brilliantly suggestive critique of the "metonymic nationalism" that displaced the class struggles of black America with understandings of *negritude* in the United States as associated with a rural, landed folk, "this insistence in the 'soilness' and 'rootedness' of black folks did not entirely refute the racists. Instead, it ended up reproducing various features of the dominant ideology by reinforcing essentialist notions of racial difference."⁴¹

39 See, for instance, Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism*, 343; Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984, reprinted 2005), 18. More prone to see self-determination and the Black Belt Nation positively, with respect to Communist organizing among Alabama sharecroppers, is Timothy V. Johnson, "'We Are Illegal Here': The Communist Party, Self-Determination, and the Alabama Sharecroppers Union," *Science & Society*, 77 (No. 4, 2011), 454–479.

40 Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 216–219. For Bill Dunne's response to the Black Belt Nation thesis in 1928 see Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity*, 73. Note as well Shachtman's early defense of the CLA's 1929 statement to Glotzer, where he stresses that the Comintern's position on blacks and self-determination is correct: Shachtman to Glotzer, 1 April 1929, Reel 20, JPC Papers.

41 Although Foley's discussion relates to the 1918–25 period and does not address the Black Belt Nation thesis explicitly, her argument is nonetheless highly relevant to later developments. See Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919*, esp. ix, but also 160–168. Note, as well, for a more abstract generalization, Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 88: "Reducing the

It is not surprising that Glotzer, based in Chicago, and other young, white, northern Left Oppositionists thought that the Comintern perspective on black self-determination inevitably tilted analysis away from a class understanding of African American experience. These younger comrades were not burdened by the inadequacies of the historical socialist and syndicalist approaches to “the Negro Question.” Unlike Cannon, they were not prone to accept the Comintern’s leadership because it demanded that older white revolutionaries come to grips with the importance of African Americans in the revolutionary struggle.⁴² They were more inclined to take a strong stand, not only in opposition to the Black Belt Nation thesis itself, but against the broader demand for self-determination, arguing that a troublingly nationalist interpretation inevitably understated important material dimensions of black oppression. At the founding conference of the Communist League of America these dissident voices spoke decisively against adopting a position on the right of “Negro self-determination.” The result was that the CLA deferred judgment on the issue until “more exhaustive material on the subject can be assembled and made available for discussion.” Cannon’s brief summary of the conference proceedings claimed that the Left Opposition regarded its approach to African Americans as of “profound importance,” but confessed that there was a “manifest insufficiency of informative material and discussion” pertaining to blacks in the United States. In this context, it was better to come to no conclusions than to leap boldly, but wrongly, into a premature elaboration of a perspective that would guide future action.

Trotsky understood passionately, in general terms, the necessity and significance of overcoming racial prejudice among members of the Party as well as within the working class more generally. He wrote to his American comrades that it was critical that they both recruit African Americans to their ranks and convince them to stand with the Left Opposition as “revolutionary brothers.”⁴³ But in terms of a particular strategic direction, and especially in understanding the place of African Americans in the dynamics of United States class struggle, Trotsky provided little guidance. Cannon wrote to Trotsky in July of 1929 that the American Left Opposition had neither a connection to blacks nor a perspective on how its approach to African Americans should be formulated. He described the debate at the May 1929 conference around the contentious issue

heterogeneity of American society and history to a multichrome mosaic of monochrome identity groups hinders rather than helps the working of understanding the past and pursuing social justice in the present.”

42 See, for instance, Cannon, *First Ten Years of American Communism*, 227–228.

43 Leon Trotsky, “Tasks of the American Opposition,” *The Militant*, 1 June 1929.

of self-determination as a “big discussion” and sought out Trotsky’s views, but no insights were immediately forthcoming from the leader of the International Left Opposition. Indeed, it is likely that when Shachtman visited Trotsky in Prinkipo in March 1930, discussion of “the Negro Question” was either lost in the avalanche of organizational and factional questions that demanded immediate attention, or sidestepped by Trotsky. The old Bolshevik was not inclined to budge from his position of support for the Communist International’s embrace of self-determination through the establishment of a Black Belt Nation within the United States.⁴⁴

Within the Left Opposition, however, the question could not be shelved. *The Militant* kicked off a discussion of “Communism and the Negro Problem” in mid-1930. It welcomed submissions on the issue from the ranks of the Left Opposition, and insisted that “leading committees” were by no means the sole repositories of “the wisdom of Marxism and Leninism.” K.M. Whitten wrote from Philadelphia, assailing the Communist Party’s endorsement of a “Negro Soviet Republic” in the Black Belt as “a purely mechanical attempt to introduce European, African, or Asiatic conditions into America.” Insisting that “the American Negro problem is an American problem,” Whitten was emphatic that, “The American Negro is integrally a part of the American working class and any attempt to segregate him is absolutely wrong.” Class consciousness, not race consciousness, would liberate the African American masses. Bourgeois blacks, promoting “race interests” through a program of segregation that would benefit the Negro professions, were merely advancing the agenda of a minority of privileged black Americans. Whitten was adamant that there was no “physiological or biological race hatred,” but that racism had been nurtured in the historical relations of social advantage, which created the color line in the interests of a ruling class that benefitted greatly from a divided working class. A Marxist approach to the black question in the United States, Whitten argued, was necessarily premised on the struggle for full social, political, and economic equality. “Self-determination,” whether embraced by the Communist Interna-

44 The above paragraphs draw on James P. Cannon, “Conference of the Opposition Communists,” *The Militant*, 1 June 1929; Trotsky to Cannon, no date [April 1929]; Cannon to Trotsky, 29 July 1929, both cited/quoted in *Dog Days*, 41–42. Also Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 58. There is no indication that any Left Opposition forces, European or American, were aware of dissident views on self-determination *inside* the Communist International. Thus, José Carlos Mariátegui opposed the Comintern’s advocacy of an Indian Republic in the Andes of South America while still aligned with the official Communist movement. His reasoning shared much with positions that would develop inside the Communist League of America (Opposition). See Marc Becker, “Mariátegui, the Comintern, and the Indigenous Question in Latin America,” *Science & Society*, 70 (October 2006), 450–479.

tional, the black bourgeoisie, or movements like Garveyism, was “nonsense.” The struggle against racism was best waged as a struggle of the entire working class, “white, black, and mixed,” a “united front of the earth’s exploited.”⁴⁵

“H,” almost certainly Hugo Oehler, continued the discussion in *The Militant* in September 1930. Opposed to the slogan of self-determination for the African-American majority of the Black Belt, “H.” pointed out that the Communist Party utilized this slogan “mainly in the north and in the industrial centers.” This suggested to the black proletariat that it was being advised by communists to move to the southern Black Belt, further implying that “the southern agrarian Negro” was “the decisive section” of the African American masses in the eyes of revolutionary communists. Convinced that Negroes were integrated into the United States capitalist order, decisively located within the exploited working class, “H.” denied that African Americans had the kind of distinctive language, culture, and economic life that marked them as an oppressed nationality. To call for their right of self-determination necessarily undermined the struggle against white chauvinism. “What the Negroes want is social and political equality,” “H.” insisted, regardless of whether they were in the north or the south. “The white worker must put the main emphasis on this side of the question.”⁴⁶

45 K.M. Whitten (Philadelphia) to the Editors, “Communism and the Negro Problem,” *The Militant*, 14 June 1930.

46 “H.” “Self-Determination: The Problem of Mobilizing the Negroes in the Class Struggle,” *The Militant*, 1 September 1930. Robin D.G. Kelley has suggested in two works that the idea of black self-determination had little working-class support in Alabama, noting in his state study of Communists during the Great Depression that most of them “never gave the slogan a second thought.” See *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 225; *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 115. James S. Allen, a CP organizer in the South as well as a figure who often wrote for Communist publications on “Negro Liberation,” acknowledged in a memoir published in 2000 that the Party did not champion the self-determination of Negroes in the black belt in the American south. See James S. Allen, “Organizing in the Depression South: A Communist’s Memoir,” *Nature, Society, and Thought*, 12 (2000), 51–52, quoted in Phelps’ edition of Shachtman, *Race and Revolution*, liv. Phelps concludes that the central importance of the Communist Party’s “self-determination” policy was to “encourage bold interracial organizing, not agitation for a Black Belt state.” He adds that, “Neither Comintern fantasies of iron discipline nor Trotskyist emphasis on programmatic correctness leaves much room for appreciating such ironies.” This is one way of framing discussion of the issue. Another is to address how Trotskyists understood that the CP gained important stature as a defender of black rights in this period, and that the audacity of the Black Belt Nation thesis may have contributed to this. More important, however, was undoubtedly Communist Party work among the unemployed, sharecroppers, and African American industrial workers, as well as campaigns against lynching and specific mobilizations of defense, most prominently the ongoing effort against the frameup of the Scottsboro Boys. None of this critical work

In the period leading up to the second national conference of the CLA in September 1931, debate and discussion about the advisability of clinging to the Communist International's advocacy of black self-determination continued. In spite of the strain a personalized and adversarial factionalism placed on relations within the League leadership, the Cannon vs. Shachtman divide seemed bridged somewhat in the unease generated by the Communist Party's advocacy of "the right of self-determination for the Negroes in the Black Belt." Little separated the two CLA camps with respect to recognition that the struggle against racism in the United States necessarily had to emphasize equality and class struggle rather than nationhood and self-determination.

One expression of this was the CLA's unambiguous accent in its propaganda around the defense of the Scottsboro Boys, a decisively important Alabama civil rights case growing out of the arrest and trial of nine young blacks falsely accused of raping two white women. The Communist Party's International Labor Defense (ILD) struggled with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for control over the defense strategy, its early activities pressuring the NAACP to retreat. On the one hand, the CP's Third Period sectarianism undoubtedly created problems for the legal defense of the Scottsboro victims, just as it made quite difficult a united front defense campaign that could have effectively mobilized the widest possible support against a legal lynching. On the other hand, in correctly appreciating that legal finessing alone would not save the Scottsboro accused, and that the case demanded a wider mobilization outside of the courts, Communists emblazoned the cause of black civil rights and equality on the banner of freedom for the Scottsboro defendants. In doing this, they galvanized support throughout the United States, establishing in the eyes of many that Communists would indeed fight for racial equality. They also used the trial of the Scottsboro Boys to promote "the right of self-determination for the Negro people in the Black Belt." As James S. Allen wrote in *The Communist*: "the defense of the Scottsboro boys [was] an

was dependent on formulating a slogan of self-determination that had little attraction to blacks, whether they lived in the north or the south, or that addressed adequately the realities of African Americans. Hence bold interracial organizing was hardly dependent on or furthered by the articulation of a Black Belt Nation thesis that was, most commentators seem to agree, little more than a dead letter. From a later period note William Appleman Williams' rejection of self-determination: "The Party line in the South ... made about as much sense to me as ... bah, humbug. That's not what these people needed, they were already an isolated community." "Interview with William Appleman Williams," in Henry Abelow et al., eds., *Visions of History: Interviews with E.P. Thompson et al.* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 128.

integral part of the struggle against the entire system of National oppression. ... [a] spark kindling the struggle of the Negro peasantry in the Black Belt."⁴⁷

In contrast, *The Militant's* vigorous calls to "Smash the Scottsboro Frame-Up!" made no reference to self-determination. Instead, the unambiguous accent in the League's agitation around Scottsboro was on the class exploitation of African Americans and the need to save the nine black youth from being railroaded to their execution or long jail terms. Calling for a true united front that encompassed the powerful labor unions and a non-sectarian appeal to socialist and other progressive forces, the CLA pushed the Communist Party to reach beyond its own front groups and organizations of the African American community (lodges, churches, etc.). The Left Opposition, through its press and open-air protest meetings, constantly promoted the necessity of defending the Scottsboro accused, doing so as widely as possible, and conducting the defense campaign in ways that stressed the *class* interests of African Americans and the vital importance of black equality. For their troubles, League members were ejected from Communist Party conferences. They were also physically rebuffed as they distributed *The Militant* outside of a New York Party forum where a speaker on "The Developing Class Struggle in the South" alluded to the right of self-determination in the Black Belt. He concluded that the rising nationalist consciousness of African Americans was a revolutionary development, and that blacks had "a homeland, here, the United States – right here in the Black Belt ... and we must develop their national consciousness to make them aware of it." CLA New York local secretary, youth leader, and Shachtman supporter, Herbert Capelis, challenged the Communist Party speaker from the floor, deriding the notion that blacks in the US were a nation and insisting that the "Negro Problem" could only be resolved when it was addressed as a class question. Capelis, drawing his interpretive understandings of nationality from Lenin, pointed out that African Americans could not be considered a national minority on the grounds that they possessed a common homeland (other than that of the United States itself), culture, language, and religion. Therefore, he

47 On the Scottsboro case see, among many possible sources, Dan Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*; Solomon, *Cry Was Unity*; Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism*, 324–348; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 78–91; Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*; Goldfield, "Recent Historiography of the Communist Party USA," 330. James S. Allen from *The Communist* is in Albert Fried, ed., *Communism in America: A History in Documents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 151, 153, although Allen subsequently revised his assessment of the extent to which self-determination and the Black Belt Nation figured in Communist organizing among African Americans. Note as well Charles H. Martin, "The International Labor Defense and Black America," *Labor History*, 26 (Spring 1985), 165–194.

concluded, “we approach the Negro from a class viewpoint. We aim to develop his *class consciousness*, not ‘national’, which means here race consciousness.”⁴⁸

A League Negro Commission was established to make “an exhaustive study” to guide the development of new policy. Fleeting references in 1932 internal factional correspondence among Shachtman and his allies allude to “the Negro Question” and the CLA’s position on it as further confirmation of Cannon’s aged rigidity and unsuitability for leadership. Yet understanding of the importance of African Americans, their place in the United States class structure, and how revolutionaries must approach the struggle against racism within the American Left Opposition was rarely the cause of friction within a divided League.⁴⁹ When Shachtman announced, in a 27 March 1933 National Executive Committee meeting, that he “had prepared a document on the negro question,” no factional sparks flew. It all seemed part of a broad and general discussion on the economic and political perspectives of the American Left Opposition which “disclose[d] a general agreement.” Indeed, Shachtman wrote to Trotsky in April 1933 that “practically every member of the League” was united in opposition to the Communist Party’s advocacy of self-determination for African Americans and the establishment of a Negro Republic in the Black Belt.⁵⁰

Young CLAers gravitating to Shachtman in the midst of the factional imbroglio within the Left Opposition in 1931–32 may well have thought that “It is hard for the old to change their opinions.”⁵¹ Yet Cannon did just this with respect to African Americans. As early as the winter of 1931 Cannon was addressing the centrality of race to all communist activity in the United States. “Communists must be the heralds of a genuine solidarity between the exploited workers of the white race and the doubly exploited Negroes,” he wrote in an editorial note in *The Militant*. Commenting on the spectacle of the Communist Party creating a circus atmosphere of “blustering vulgarians” out of allegations

48 “Smash the Scottsboro Frame-Up!” *The Militant*, 1 May 1931; “Rally to Defense of the Scottsboro Boys! A United Working Class Front Will Prevent a Legal Lynching,” and “In Defense of Scottsboro,” *The Militant*, 1 June 1931; Herbert Capelis, “The Party Discusses the Negro Problem,” *The Militant*, 7 November 1931.

49 At the end of 1932 National Committee Executive minutes revealed no factional disagreements over the proposal by Oehler that Shachtman would present a New York Open Forum “on the negro question.” See National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 1 December 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers; “Open Forum: The Negroes in America – National or Proletarian Revolution. Speaker, Max Shachtman,” *The Militant*, 3 December 1932.

50 See, for instance, *Dog Days*, 41–42, and among the documents included in this collection, John Edwards to Max Shachtman, 16 April 1932, “Cannon and Swabeck Have Rightist Tendencies,” 209 and Shachtman to Trotsky, 15 April 1933, “We Don’t Want a Split,” 503–504; National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 27 March 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers.

51 Edwards to Shachtman, 16 April 1932, *Dog Days*, 209.

that a Finnish Party member in Harlem, August Yokinen, was guilty of prejudice against Negro workers, Cannon insisted that “trifling with the Negro question” in this way was unseemly. In his earlier days in the Workers (Communist) Party, Cannon had seen Jay Lovestone, Robert Minor, and others turn revolutionary work among African Americans into “a factional football.” Rather than engage in the hard and patient work of difficult education, relentless in its “unceasing and systematic explanation combined with a genuine policy of equality in practice,” Lovestone, Minor & Company opted instead for a strategy “of flattery, condescension and bribery of Negro intellectuals and careerists on the make.” This repelled many self-reliant black proletarian militants, and “arrested the real work among the Negroes.” Cannon saw an echo of this in the Party’s 1931 call for the mass show trial of Yokinen, who may well have been guilty of racism. But in summoning “delegations to the sport” of Yokinen’s public humiliation, in calling on all workers’ organizations to pack a Harlem hall with anti-racist crusaders, and in claiming that this hearing would be “the forerunner of similar trials all over the country,” Cannon smelled something foul in the Stalinist proclamation of an anti-racist Inquisition. No doubt racism existed among Communist rank-and-file members. In Cannon’s view, however, the education needed as the foundation of the struggle against this racism required “a calm atmosphere; an atmosphere free from demagoguery, hypocrisy and incitement; an atmosphere created by teachers of the proletariat, not by terrorizers.” Asking whether the Communist Party was not “insulting the intelligence of the Negro masses,” with such show trials, and whether it was not “stultifying the Party with [a] stupid campaign of terror,” Cannon insisted that for African Americans “radical persecution was a bitter actuality that confronts them every moment of their lives. They have learned to recognize all forms of this reactionary poison, including that form of so-called freedom from it which protests too much.”⁵²

52 Cannon, “Trifling with the Negro Question,” *The Militant*, 1 March 1931. Note as well Tom Stamm, “The Annual Heresy Trial,” *The Militant*, 12 February 1932. On the Yokinen trial see the Party account in *Race Hatred on Trial* (New York 1931), and the critical commentary in Bryan D. Palmer, “Race and Revolution,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 54 (Fall 2004), 200–201. Extended discussion, including accounts of other trials, appears in Foner and Shapiro, eds., *American Communism and American Blacks*, 147–199; Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 353–358, 441–442; Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 144–146; Howe and Coser, *The American Communist Party*, 209–211; Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Great Depression*, 47–51; Storch, *Red Chicago*, 191–192. Howard Fast noted that, “People were expelled from the Party for speaking of a ‘Negro girl’ or of a ‘black night’ for both ‘girl’ and ‘black’ had become magical taboo words, the use of which indicated that a white person had deep wells of racism within him. This particular horror mounted to a point where dozens of Communists I knew avoided the company of all Negroes, so terrified were they of taboo words or actions that could lead to expulsion. Work among the Negroes collapsed com-

This was an orientation that translated easily into rejection of the unsustainable claims and questionable agitational strengths associated with the Black Belt Nation thesis.

By 1932, Cannon's speech notes for a 22 April Open Forum on "The Negro Question and the Scottsboro Case" reveal that he no longer advanced self-determination as a tactical or strategic direction in the struggle against racism. This did not mean he understated the importance of African Americans in revolutionary politics. On the contrary, in moving away from the self-determination stand that he had embraced at the Sixth Congress of the Communist International in 1928, Cannon commenced his speech by stressing that, "The Negro, and in particular the Negro worker, is of exceptional concern to the Communist movement." Recognizing that African Americans were exploited as workers and suffered political, economic, and social discrimination as members of a racial minority, Cannon stressed that precisely because the Negro "has more reason than anybody to be a communist," much had been done historically to make blacks pawns in capitalism's relentless need to keep workers divided and weakened. Fostering competition between blacks and whites in the labor market, race prejudice was "inculcated by class society." African American leaders were encouraged to see white workers as the enemies of blacks, a stand that they often took and one that was made all the easier by discrimination against the Negro on the part of the established trade unions. Against the movements of privileged whites in support of African Americans, which Cannon claimed smelled of "patronage and charity," stood the necessity of "struggle against the class regime which breeds" discrimination and division. "The Scottsboro case," Cannon wrote, highlighted the "inseparability of the question of Negro rights from the class struggle." It thus proved "one of the most inspiring" events "in American labor history," rightly heralded in a nation-wide mobilization, parades of black and white workers, and a tour by the mothers of the falsely accused and unjustly incarcerated Scottsboro defendants. In its uncompromising demand to free the Scottsboro prisoners, the mobilization dealt a visible blow to the injustice of the class system, exposed the ugly racist underside of American capitalism to the open court of world opinion, and reached the black masses with the ideas and idealism of communism.

Cannon's views, like those of the CLA as a whole, were now structured along lines of revolutionary integration. It was understood that the chief demand of "the enlightened Negroes" was "*for equal rights.*" In this difficult battle, it was

pletely, and at last William Z. Foster had to step in to halt what was becoming a threat to the very existence of the Party itself." See Howard Fast, *The Naked God: The Writer and the Communist Party* (London: Bodley Head, 1958), 113.

necessary to win the majority of the American working class, especially those organized in the trade unions, to embrace their black brothers and sisters in common class struggle. "One act by the white workers" in solidarity with blacks, Cannon thought, was "worth more than a thousand arguments." With respect to the differences between the CP and its Left Opposition, the shoe was on the other foot as far as the politics of fighting racism in the United States went: rather than black self-determination, Cannon was suggesting, African Americans were looking for "a movement of the white workers" on their behalf. The Scottsboro defense mobilization, he insisted, was "the first large-scale dramatization of a struggle on this line" and it had to be carried to victory.⁵³

In the spring of 1933 the first of the "Scottsboro boys" to be tried, Heywood Patterson, was found guilty a second time after an original conviction was overturned. The verdict was death in the electric chair. Denouncing "the viciously prejudiced" jury decision, *The Militant* railed against "the poisoned ideology of the reactionary capitalist South." Patterson's conviction and sentence was "class murder" achieved through "frame-up, perjury, intimidation, corruption and inflaming of ignorance." As this verdict was yet again set aside in June 1933, the Communist League of America (Opposition) called for a new trial, which would "be made the starting point for a whirlwind campaign that will force the complete freeing of all nine boys." George Saul addressed a Bronx Open Forum on "Lynchings: The Problem of the Negro Worker," in November 1933. When another Alabama jury convicted Patterson for the third time, a December 1933 *Militant* headline screamed, "Biased Judge Rushes Negro Boys to Chair." One of Cannon's close supporters, Tom Stamm, wrote a lengthy denunciation of capitalist justice that called for a mass working-class protest to free the Scottsboro victims of lynch law. Cannon, in turn, extended the discussion with a 15 December 1933 Open Forum at the 16th Street International Workers School on "The Meaning of the Recent Lynchings: Maryland, California, Missouri – What Next?" Four months later, in a Boston lecture, "Fascism – Does it Menace America?," Cannon again addressed the alarming symptoms of racist reaction, detailing the nature of the recent lynching wave and situating it within the history of violence against African Americans. He insisted that, "The struggle against lynching was bound up with the problems of the liberation of the

53 The above paragraphs draw on "Open Forum: The Negro Question and the Scottsboro Case," *The Militant*, 16 April 1932; "Negro Question and the Scottsboro Case: New York Forum," 22 April 1932, Box 27/Reel 33, JPC Papers. Note as well, "Clarence Darrow and the Scottsboro Case," and "Mobilize White Workers for Scottsboro Prisoners," in Fred Stanton and Michael Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934 – The Communist League of America, 1932–1934* (New York: Monad, 1985), 27–28, 77–78.

Negroes,” which could only be addressed by the “revolutionary movement.” It was critical, he argued, that “white workers must lead the way” in a resolute defense of their black counterparts, who must be made secure in a true equality.⁵⁴

Hugo Oehler offered a lengthy three-part essay, “The Negro and the Class Struggle,” that, up to 1933, presented the most extensive critique of self-determination (and, by extension, the Black Belt Nation thesis) to come out of the Communist League of America. Appearing in *The Militant* in April – May 1932, Oehler’s arguments were published as his “personal views.” His perspective grew out of his participation in the Commission established to assemble materials on “the Negro Question,” and was given an airing so that a full discussion could develop within the League. Oehler situated the struggle for black equality in the United States in a lengthy historical overview of capitalist development and class formation, pointing out that “the problem of labor power” was central to how the Civil War and Reconstruction period in American history (1861–1877) led to an end to chattel slavery that merely further entrenched class rule and intensified exploitation. This process, consolidating the hegemony of northern capitalist interests, resulted in the simultaneous subordination *and* survival of the southern plantation elite. It insured as well the immiseration and oppression of the “freed Negro,” now “part slave, part serf, and part wage slave.” Class formation in the United States was stamped with the indelible mark of racist marginalization:

The exploiters of the wage slaves were not long in learning they had a hundred times more in common with the former chattel masters than with the former slaves. The freedom taken by the slaves had to be checked; the dictatorship against the chattel masters was modified when their

54 The above paragraphs draw on “Scottsboro Frame-Up Laid Bare,” *The Militant*, 15 February 1933; “Convict Patterson: United Mass Protest Must Save Scottsboro Boys,” *The Militant*, 15 April 1933; “Scottsboro March On Capital,” *The Militant*, 29 April 1933; “Scottsboro Decision Reversed,” *The Militant*, 1 July 1933; “Lynch Threat for Scottsboro Boys,” *The Militant*, 13 November 1933; “Resume Trial of Scottsboro Negro Boys,” *The Militant*, 25 November 1933; “Biased Judge Rushes Negro Boys to Chair,” *The Militant*, 9 December 1933; “The Scottsboro Struggle,” *The Militant*, 16 December 1933. On lynching see: “Bronx Open Forum: George Saul – Lynchings: The Problem of the Negro Worker,” *The Militant*, 4 November 1933; “Two Negroes Lynched in South,” *The Militant*, 27 February 1933; “Open Forum,” *The Militant*, 9 December 1933; 16 December 1933; Cannon, Speech Notes for “Fascism – Does it Menace America?” a Lecture in Boston, 4 May 1934, in Box 28/Reel 34, JPC Papers.

resistance was broken, when they came to terms – the terms of the northern capitalists. From then on the capitalist supremacy took on a form of democracy for the white rulers of the south and a new form of dictatorship against the Negro masses The slaves' 'freedom' turned out to be a bourgeois joke. The former slave found himself free from his former master's obligation to feed, clothe, and shelter him, and keep him well as property, but not free from the economic exploitation and political domination of the capitalists and plantation owners.

This entre of blacks into the freedoms of the capitalist marketplace was, for Oehler, never complete, precisely because "the supply [of labor] was too great for developing capitalism to absorb" at the time. Black workers were a racially marked reserve army of labor and the late nineteenth-century influx of "European wage slaves, already trained, kept in check the rapid transformation of former chattel slaves into wage slaves." Without land, without tools, and, most critically, without the capacity to wage a "successful revolution to free themselves from the white masters," blacks could not extricate themselves from the iron-clad grip of the white elite on the means of subsistence in the southern plantation economy. This constrained African American possibilities. The black masses "adjusted themselves to the new condition – unassimilated as wage slave, not held as chattel slaves; reflecting the old, and looking at the new, but representing neither."

Oehler's phrasing grates on contemporary sensibilities. He referred too glibly to emancipation as "a worse slavery than before"⁵⁵ and framed his statement in crude assertions that, "The Negro was brought from Africa, from a system of Barbarism where nations as political states were only in the process of formation." Yet "The Negro and the Class Struggle" posed the class nature of the African American struggle for freedom clearly. "The history of American labor," Oehler wrote, was simply incomprehensible without the Marxist appreciation of how the freeing of the slaves forever forged the destiny of the white and negro proletariat as inexorably linked. While no doubt different from W.E.B. Du Bois's pioneering later arguments about the black pursuit of freedom in the aftermath of the Civil War as a class struggle, in many regards Oehler's analytic directions anticipated Du Bois in fruitful, if understandably truncated, ways.⁵⁶

55 Note the sensitive discussion in David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York and London: Verso, 1991), 43–92.

56 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New

Like Du Bois, Oehler placed concluding emphasis on the Civil War-Reconstruction era. The Left Oppositionist's briefer journalistic commentary on "The Counter-Revolution of Property" stressed the "reaction, terror, etc. against the exploited" that, for Oehler, contextualized how revolutionaries needed to envision the struggle for black emancipation in the 1930s. After decades of lynch law, legal discrimination, segregation of all public space from schools to housing to parks, disenfranchisement, prohibition of intermarriage, trade union mechanisms of exclusion, and the particularities of black criminalization, including the chain gang, it was impossible to separate capitalism and racism in America. Overthrowing capitalism was the only means of securing black emancipation and achieving equality for the African American masses, just as the constant struggle against "lynch law" was a central and necessary component of how capitalism would ultimately be defeated. It followed, therefore, that to adopt the slogan of self-determination for the oppressed and exploited Negro and to stipulate that this could take place through the creation of a Black Belt Nation was to abdicate the responsibility of asserting, constantly and forcefully, that the struggle for African American liberation was a class struggle against capitalism. Blacks in the United States were not a nationality, Oehler insisted, but a racial minority. Its material circumstances were now inevitably stamped, not with the past traditions of African ancestry, but with the generations-old realities of American economic life. This "Capitalist America" forced blacks to "adopt the language and religion and modes of the country and of the economic system." They, not the traditions of a distant past, were now the "DETERMINING FACTORS" of the Negro's make-up. If African ancestry and racial difference, which would always be articulated in the concrete expressions of being black in America, could not be eliminated, they inevitably raised to the forefront the role of the Negro proletariat. Decades of capitalist development had not eliminated the special oppression of black workers. They did, however, bring to a close the "half slaves-half serfs" ambiguities of class formation that flowed from the wake of emancipation and compromised freedom and equality in the 1860s and 1870s.

Fifty years later, it was black proletarianization, North *and* South, determining the course of the struggle: the making of black equality was destined to be a class struggle. Allowing that the call for self-determination for national

York: Harcourt Brace, 1935). Du Bois's first chapters outline his framing of the interpretation of Reconstruction: The Black Worker; The White Worker; The Planter; The General Strike.

and racial minorities was a tactical, transitional decision, depending on historical circumstances, Oehler nonetheless insisted that in the United States of the 1930s there were no grounds to put forward this demand. Black workers must lead the struggle for African American equality, it being incumbent on white workers to demonstrate decisively their willingness to fight for black workers and thus insure the victory of all proletarians, “regardless of their race,” over entrenched capitalism:

The Negro of America was not snatched from a State or Nation in Africa with national aspirations and ideologies. Neither has America given the Negro as a Negro the material base for nationalism as such. The class struggle of the Negro is not cloaked in a national form (complicated with the national bourgeois influence) that calls for the slogan of self-determination at special stages and under special conditions in the struggle. It is cloaked in the race form. ... The Negro worker and farmer, being even more suppressed and exploited than his white brother requires special consideration from the revolutionary party, even though economically he is a *worker* or *dirt farmer*. This double exploitation and class oppression is carried out through the race form of the class struggle, which does not include the national form in the political sense. Stalinism says, because the Negro constitutes a doubly exploited racial minority, and regardless of the argument on nationalism, it is proper to present the slogan of Self-Determination for oppressed racial minorities as well as national minorities. ... But the main struggle against the reactionary ideology is not a problem of the Negroes, but of the whites.

For Oehler, “The victory of the proletariat includes within it the solution of the double exploitation of the Negro masses.”

This was an unduly formulaic resolution of “the Negro Question.” But it nevertheless went a long way towards dispelling the Stalinist Black Belt Nation’s tendency to suppress the class content of the struggle for black equality in cross-class illusions: “We must minimize the desires of the Negro Petty-Bourgeoisie, and enlarge the form of the proletarian interest of the Negro who is, like the white worker, choked with bourgeois ideology.” Oehler’s discussion of “The Negro and the Class Struggle” indicated how far the CLA had come in appreciating both the centrality and the complexity of “the Negro Question” for American revolutionaries. He concluded that for African Americans capitalism had not produced a racialized order that crystallized “the Negro” as a national minority, rooted in the mythologies of blood ties, gens, and clans. “The American Negro,” Oehler argued in his repudiation of the Communist International’s

understanding of the need to call for the self-determination of the Black Belt, “presents no such picture. His is a different and far more difficult problem.”⁵⁷

This claim that blacks in the United States could not be straightjacketed into conventional Third International understandings of the question of colonized minorities, defined through recourse to examination of the position of embattled ethnic groups in the Czarist Empire, was generalized throughout the League’s leadership by the end of 1932. In the same period, Right Opposition Lovestoneites like Will Herberg were offering similar repudiations of the Comintern view that African Americans could be considered an oppressed nation.⁵⁸ Shachtman presented an Open Forum on behalf of the New York branch of the CLA on 9 December 1932, his talk entitled, “The Negroes in America: National or Proletarian Revolution?”⁵⁹

Trotsky nonetheless still held to older Third International views in 1933, when one of the Cannon group’s most experienced cadre, Arne Swabeck,

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- 57 The above paragraphs draw on CLA, National Committee Minutes, 25 April 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers; Hugo Oehler, “The Negro and the Class Struggle,” *The Militant*, 30 April 1932; 7 May 1932; 14 May 1932, components of which now reprinted in Le Blanc, Palmer, Bias, and Pollack, eds., *US Trotskyism, 1928–1965, Part 1*, 240–247. Note as well Oehler, “National Revolution in the South? Discussion Article on the Negro Question,” *The Militant*, 22 October 1932; and an article signed only Sn [Shachtman?]. “Ala. Negro Croppers Resist White Terror,” *The Militant*, 31 December 1932. Oehler’s articles perhaps warrant moderating Christopher Phelps’ suggestion in the introduction to *Race and Revolution* that Max Shachtman’s “Communism and the Negro” was a direct response to conversations between Swabeck and Trotsky in 1933, a position that understates CLA consideration of how to formulate a communist approach to black America prior to these discussions and elevates Shachtman’s contribution to a rather singular endeavor. As valuable as was Shachtman’s contribution and Phelps’ historical excavation and republication of this important unpublished document, it is necessary to point out, as I have shown above, that the League as a whole was engaged in deliberations addressing what was called the “Negro Question” from 1929–33. Oehler, as a leading figure in the Cannon group and as a member of the CLA’s “Negro Commission” played an important role in refining the Left Opposition critique of self-determination for the Black Belt, and indeed drafted positions which undoubtedly informed Shachtman’s perspective. See Phelps, ed., *Race and Revolution*, esp. xxxix. Oehler and his writings are not mentioned in this account. They are equally absent in Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 58–60, which presents the CLA’s position on self-determination and the Black Belt as “Shachtman’s distinctive approach.”
- 58 See Will Herberg, “A False Orientation in Negro Work,” *Revolutionary Age*, 14 February 1931; Herberg, “In Reply to Dr. DuBois in *The Crisis: Communism and the Negro*,” *Revolutionary Age*, 5 September & 12 September 1931; “Marxism and the ‘Negro Question,’” in Paul Le Blanc and Tim Davenport, eds., *The ‘American Exceptionalism’ of Jay Lovestone and His Comrades, 1929–1940: Dissident Marxism in the United States*, Volume 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 412–422.
- 59 Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 58; “Open Forum,” *The Militant*, 3 December 1932.

traveled to Prinkipo to discuss American and international affairs with the International Left Opposition leader. As we have seen, Swabeck's European trip was opposed by Shachtman and his anti-Cannon supporters, maligned as an unnecessary junket. In the exchanges of the National Committee emissary and Trotsky "the Negro Question" was by no means a central issue. They did, however, reveal a startling disconnect between Trotsky's "hypothetical" and "general considerations," framed as they were by the Russian experience but lacking in any familiarity with the conditions of blacks in either the American south or the wider national class structure, and Swabeck's more concrete elaborations. This disjuncture illuminated why the demand for self-determination led revolutionaries into the cul-de-sac of nationality, obscuring the class place of African Americans within United States capitalism. The Trotsky-Swabeck dialogue indicated the former's endless curiosity, imaginative capacity to speculate, and demanding programmatic precision. All of this combined to leave the somewhat down-to-earth Swabeck both astounded at Trotsky's ignorance of American conditions and tongue-tied. Trotsky exhibited a truly dialectical grappling with the complexity of Leninism's orthodox arsenal of addressing the national question as a transitional bridge to a yet-to-be realized revolutionary class consciousness, on the part of *both* blacks and whites. Confessing that he knew little of the actual experience of African Americans, Trotsky inquired, in what Swabeck must have thought incredulously naïve questions, whether Negroes spoke their own language in the American South. He wondered aloud if this was possibly a mechanism of survival against vigilantes and their lynch law, where conversing in a language incomprehensible to white supremacist power could well protect blacks. He also inquired (drawing no doubt on his knowledge of Russian serfdom) if black sharecroppers rented their land from the state. The CLA National Committee member was no doubt confirmed in his conviction that African Americans were not an oppressed nation but a racialized caste that had been overwhelmingly proletarianized. On the question of land, Swabeck noted that blacks rented, "From private owners, from white farm and plantation owners; some Negroes own the land they till." Special oppression certainly existed, and Swabeck noted that, "The Negro population of the north are kept on a lower level, economically, socially, and culturally. They are barred from many important trade unions. During and since the war the migration from the south has increased; perhaps about four to five million Negroes now live in the north. The northern Negro population is overwhelmingly proletarianized, but also in the south the proletarianization is increasing." Against the notion of the Negro as a nation, Swabeck was unequivocal: "Today none of the southern states have a Negro majority. This lends emphasis to the heavy migration to the north. ... The Negroes have become fully assimilated, Amer-

icanized, and their life in America has overbalanced the traditions of the past, modified and changed them. ... They have no special national costume, or special national culture, or religion; nor have they any special national minority interests." The "existence of a special Negro language in the southern states is possible," Swabeck conceded politely, adding emphatically, "but in general all American Negroes speak English." Insisting that African Americans were "an important factor in the class struggle, almost a decisive factor," Swabeck argued that the slogan of self-determination was ill-suited to win black workers to the cause of revolutionary communism. Instead, Swabeck claimed that black workers should be approached and, he implied, white workers routinely pressed, on the basis of struggling for full social, political, and economic equality for Negroes. Calling for the right of black self-determination was not, according to Swabeck, what the CLA should be doing. The "Negro masses" were not striving to overcome national oppression but to achieve equality. Self-determination as a slogan of recruitment inevitably tended "to lead the negroes away from the class basis" of their lives in America, pushing them in the direction of "racial" considerations.

Trotsky's response undoubtedly baffled Swabeck. He criticized the CLA's accent on equality as "liberal," suggesting that appeals to reforming American capitalism on the race question would do little more than cultivate illusions among African Americans. It would lead them into alliances with petty bourgeois race leaders who would champion the rallying cry of "equal rights," misleading the black masses into a belief that "according to the law you have the same right." Trotsky continued to favor the call for self-determination, recognizing that capitalists would never grant such a demand. In the struggle for its realization, race leaders of the petty bourgeois sort would be exposed: "The petty bourgeoisie will take up the demand for 'social, political, and economic equality' and for 'self-determination' but prove absolutely incapable in struggle: the Negro proletariat will march over the petty bourgeoisie in the direction toward the proletarian revolution." In the process it was essential that the white working class abandon its status as "oppressors, scoundrels, who persecute the black and the yellow, hold them in contempt and lynch them." With 99.9 percent of the American workers incarcerated in racist belief systems, according to Trotsky, he insisted that *both* equality *and* self-determination were progressive demands only to the extent that they were thwarted. Proletarian revolutionaries in the United States were those, Trotsky claimed aggressively, who would endorse the right of their African American brothers and sisters to self-determination, and who would be willing to defend that right against the police and the capitalist state. In this context, Trotsky was even willing to grant that the call for a Black Belt Nation could advance revolutionary interests.

As Swabeck reeled, asking pointedly, "Are the Negroes, in a political sense, a national minority or a racial minority," Trotsky refused to be pinned down: "The Negroes are not a race and not a nation," he replied. "We do not, of course, obligate the Negroes to become a nation: if they are, then that is a question of their consciousness, that is, what they desire and what they strive for." Swabeck, sensing the exhaustion of the argument, agreed to disagree.

He wrote to Cannon that "L.D. is in total disagreement with the viewpoint we have been developing towards rejection of the party slogans of 'Self-Determination for the Negroes' and 'State unity in the Black Belt.' ... L.D. thinks these slogans correct, approaching them only from the standpoint of general considerations ..." Hugo Oehler, for one, was not swayed: "The old man is seldom wrong," Oehler wrote to Cannon at the end of March 1933, "but I am of the opinion he had better watch his step on this one point." At Prinkipo, the CLA found "the Negro Question" less resolved by Trotsky's programmatic jousting than complicated in disturbing ambiguities.⁶⁰

Cannon and his supporters, then, were not bit players in the development of a new orientation toward African Americans on the part of Trotskyists in the United States, let alone entrenched advocates of an outmoded perspective. They were present at the creation of the shift away from the Comintern's endorsement of self-determination and the Black Belt Nation. Glotzer referred in private communications with Shachtman to "the correctness of our view" and "our point" when referring to the critique of the self-determination slogan.

60 For the Trotsky-Swabeck exchange see Communist League of America, "The Negro Question in America – Minutes of discussion between comrades Trotsky and Swabeck," *Internal Bulletin*, 12 (19 April 1933), reprinted in Leon Trotsky, George Breitman, ed., *Leon Trotsky on Black Nationalism and Self-Determination* (New York: Pathfinder, 1967), 20–31, and present in typescript in "Minutes of Discussion: Negro Question," 28 February 1933, Roll 4/Reel 3347, MS Papers. There is a useful, accessible summary of the Swabeck-Trotsky dialogue in Phelps, ed., *Race and Revolution*, xxiv–xxxix, although there are grounds for questioning Phelps' claim that Swabeck's reply to Trotsky's comment on language was "very feeble." It perhaps follows too closely and uncritically the intellectual superiority and condescension of the Shachtman-Glotzer group. Glotzer wrote to Shachtman, for instance, that upon reading the minutes of the discussion between Trotsky and Swabeck on "the Negro Question," he understood "why L.D. expressed himself in the manner he did. Arne's presentation would hardly be convincing, and I hope you do a better job" Glotzer to Shachtman, 2 July 1933, Roll 11/Reel 3354, MS Papers. For Swabeck's and Oehler's communications to Cannon see Swabeck to Cannon, 5 March 1933; Oehler to Cannon, 25 March 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers. There is an accessible and useful compilation that addresses Trotsky's positions in Leon Trotsky, *On Black Nationalism and Self-Determination* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972). See, as well, the broader discussion in Christian Hogsberg, "The Prophet on Black Power: Trotsky on Race in the US," *International Socialist: A Quarterly Review of Socialist Theory*, 121 (January 2009), <http://www.isj.org.uk/the-prophet-on-black-power-trotsky-on-race-in-the-us>.

But when factional property rights over the CLA's hardening approach to the Black Belt Nation thesis and the general move away from self-determination surfaced, Cannon bristled. He considered such claims little more than "another misrepresentation" in the factional hostilities of 1932–33.

To be sure, Cannon himself may have contributed to the "narcissism of small differences" that seemed to overwhelm the CLA in the personal factionalism of the dog days. Glotzer reported to Shachtman that Cannon, in the aftermath of the Trotsky-Swabeck discussions on black self-determination, was reporting that "the Old Man" had "emphatically rejected" the repudiation of the Black Belt Nation slogan/thesis of the Communist Party. This prompted Glotzer to conclude that "we will have to engage in a lengthy discussion with LD" to convince him of the importance of moving off the ground established by the Communist International on the struggle for black liberation.⁶¹

It was indeed Shachtman who would, over the course of February – March 1933, produce the most sustained discussion of the American Left Opposition's position on blacks, the struggle against racism, and the folly of reducing the "almost wholly unique question of the Negroes in the United States" to the generalized Bolshevik understanding of oppressed nationalities. Written as a pamphlet that Shachtman originally proposed be published by the League, "Communism and the Negro" was a forceful repudiation of the Communist Party's call for Black Belt Nation self-determination. As such, it challenged Trotsky's views on the struggle for African American liberation at the same time that it adjusted arguments circulating in the CLA according to what was known of Trotsky's positions. In effect, Shachtman struggled to summarize positions that were now endorsed by the CLA as a whole, and which challenged Trotsky's reluctance to discard Comintern positions on oppressed nations and the right of self-determination. Clearly drawing on Oehler's discussion articles in *The Militant*, Shachtman smoothed the rough edges of his comrade's arguments. He expanded the historical allusions greatly, relied on more statistical data to

61 Glotzer to National Executive Committee, 16 April 1933, in CLA, National Executive Committee, Minutes, 19 April 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers; Cannon, Handwritten notes accompanying typescript, "The Internal Crisis of the American League," and headed "Mass Work," dated [1932–1933: re Weisbord], in "Speeches and Writings, 1932–1933," Box 27 / Reel 33, JPC Papers. Glotzer to Shachtman, 15 April 1933; 22 May 1933; 2 July 1933, Roll 11/Reel 3354, MS Papers. Oehler, clearly a Cannon supporter in this period, was one of a group of Chicago-based CLA members whom Glotzer wrote to Shachtman were in agreement with "your Negro manuscript." But Glotzer also indicated that Oehler had also engaged critically with "the thesis," which he wanted refined. This matter will be addressed in detail below.

convey the extent of black proletarianization and the migration of masses of African Americans to the industrial cities of the North, and pilloried the “thoroughly ludicrous nature of the new Stalinist theory on the American Negro question.” The very notion of the Black Belt Nation was castigated as empirically unverifiable, politically reactionary, and dangerously isolationist in focusing the struggle for African American liberation on an imagined community of a past associated with rural production and chattel slavery. The Negro of the 1920s and 1930s looked to the dawn of a new day, Shachtman insisted, not into the shadows of the southern plantocracy. “The day of the exclusive predominance of the agricultural Negro has long since past,” the Left Oppositionist asserted decisively, and “the industrial Negro” was now “the leader of his race, the comrade in arms of the white proletariat.” Class formation in the United States “opened up a new period in the history of the American Negro, the period of his final and triumphant struggle for emancipation from *all* slavery.” This was not an issue of self-determination, national oppression, and territorial claims, but of revolutionary integration and class mobilization to redefine, as had northern capitalist interests in the Civil War, the very substance of the nation. “The American Negroes do indeed possess a territory,” Shachtman insisted, “But it is not the miserable caricature which the Stalinists seek to put forward as the ‘basis for a Negro nation’. It is the United States as a whole which, in common with the white workers and poor farmers, is the Negro’s homeland.” That homeland had for too long been governed by fundamental racial inequalities, which included the intensified exploitation of the black laboring masses and the terror they experienced at the hand of Jim Crow and Judge Lynch. The “Negro Question” was now a matter of realizing equality, a project that could only be brought to its final fruition by class struggle, revolution, and the overthrowing of capitalism. White workers could make no advance in their own struggle for freedom if they did not champion Negro rights and secure the support of “the vast reservoir of strength and militancy constituted by twelve million black people.” African Americans, increasingly a proletarianized body reduced “to the lowest rank in the social order, where they are forcibly retained as the pariah, the low caste, the untouchable of American capitalist democracy,” could only advance if they aligned themselves with the insurgent working class. “The class struggle in the United States has reached the stage where this unity of the Negro race with the white proletariat and poor farmers is not only possible and necessary, but inevitable,” Shachtman wrote. The destiny of the Negro race “is now connected with only one stratum of society: the working class.”⁶²

62 In the above paragraphs I draw on the published version of Shachtman’s “Communism

Shachtman's pointed arguments represented a significant breakthrough in understanding both the onus of responsibility for ending racism that revolutionaries and white workers had to shoulder *and* the central importance of black workers in advancing the cause of socialism and freedom. The pages of "Communism and the Negro" challenged the racist platitudes of its times – from the mythologizing of the black rapist to the folk rootedness of the black masses in the southern soil of the plantation system – and refused to countenance the continuity of African American subordination. The document returned to basic Leninist appeals, which called, not for self-determination, but for the joining together of black and white workers so that the "racial struggle [could] fuse itself with the revolutionary struggles of labor against capital." As the Communist International urged in 1921, "The militant mood of the Negro must attain expression through the proletarian revolution and not independently of it." This coming together of race and class, as Barbara Foley has shown,⁶³ existed in nascent form in 1919, but foundered on the shoals of the culturalism of the Harlem Renaissance, with class struggle displaced by an aesthetics of the African American folk. By 1925 the powerful symbolism of Harlem as a new "race capital," a metaphorical Mecca of black self-determination in the cultural world of arts and letters, did much to dampen the possibilities of the African American working class exercising its leadership in the struggle for a wider human emancipation. None of this, as Foley argues, can be separated from "the Left's accession to nationalism as a necessary stage in social transformation." With self-determinist nationalism in the Harlem air of the northern end-point of black migration, and the subsequent dampening of the revolutionary conjuncture of class and race in the United States of the mid-1920s, it was ironically left to the Stalinized Communist International and its American standard-bearers to push the self-determination project to its logical conclusion in calling for a Black Belt Nation in the old cotton-producing South. The Communist League of America (Opposition) as a whole took some time, understandably, to extricate itself from the political house of smoke and mirrors constituting what Shachtman labeled little more than a separatist blunder. But by 1933 it had done so, and Shachtman's "Communism and the Negro," with its rallying cry of "equal rights for the oppressed Negro" and its unambiguous conclusion that, "The proletarian revolution is the road to freedom," stood as a landmark document in the development of a distinct American contribution to revolutionary Marxism.

and the Negro," in Phelps, ed., *Race and Revolution*. All quotes in the paragraph above and those that follow are taken from this 102-page document, which is usefully indexed.

63 See the instructive arguments in Foley, *Spectres of 1919*.

Nonetheless, the Shachtman essay had been produced quickly and while it was generally regarded within the CLA as a highly significant contribution, it required refinement politically. An important and detailed set of unattributed "Remarks on Shachtman's Draft, 'Communism and the Negro,'" pose a number of trenchant criticisms. Probably written by Hugo Oehler, this 13-page typescript lays out a series of suggestive probes, queries, and critical commentaries on the proposed pamphlet, prefacing the remarks with an acknowledgment of the tentative nature of the rejoinder's conclusions and praising Shachtman's draft as "the best, by far, treatment of the Negro question done to date in the Communist movement."⁶⁴

64 The following paragraphs, unless otherwise noted, quote directly from the typescript, "Remarks on Schachtman's [sic] Draft, 'Communism and the Negro,'" Roll 11/Reel 3354, MS Papers. Following the language used in the communist movement of the 1930s, this typescript uses the term "Negro" in the same way that we would today refer to blacks or African Americans. I therefore adopt this usage, but without clumsily placing "Negro" in constant quotation marks. The typescript, written as a stream of consciousness piece, is neither signed nor attributed to an individual author. I am convinced on a variety of grounds that it was produced by Hugo Oehler, rather than Albert Glotzer or other figures in the youthful Chicago cohort that was both close to Shachtman and enthusiastic about publishing his views on "the Negro Question." The grounds for attributing the remarks on Shachtman's draft to Oehler include its writing style, congruence with previous signed articles in *The Militant*, references to Oehler's response to the draft in Shachtman-Glotzer correspondence, and the original misspelling of Shachtman's name. That said, I have erred on the side of caution and not named Oehler as the author of this document in the text above. That Oehler was almost certainly the author is significant, since it establishes that the Cannon group's leading authority on "The Negro and the Class Struggle," agreed with Shachtman in general, but had a series of important critical reflections and refinements on Shachtman's position. My impression is that Glotzer was unable to sustain the kind of detailed criticism of the Shachtman document contained in the "Remarks" and relied instead on cues from the Trotsky-Swabeck discussion, especially as they pertained to theoretical issues. Glotzer promised "detailed comment on ... various points," but I don't think he ever delivered this assessment. His brief statement on "Communism and the Negro" does not coincide with the nature of the criticisms in the "Remarks." Glotzer to Shachtman, 22 May 1933, Roll 11/Reel 3354, MS Papers: "The Negro thesis has made a strong impression on me. ... I am impressed particularly with the general analysis of the Negro and his position in American society, the question of the Black Belt, and the theory of self-determination. But somehow I feel that the MSS weakens towards the end, in the sense that the theory of the permanent revolution is not posed powerfully enough." Trotsky had said to Swabeck, "Minutes of Discussion: Negro Question," 28 February 1933: "Weisbord is correct in a certain sense that the 'self-determination' of the negroes belongs to the question of the permanent revolution in America." By July, Glotzer's promise of commentary on Shachtman's draft had drifted into insistence that "the MSS, I think, will be just the thing that will convince [Trotsky] of the correctness of our point of view." Glotzer thought it needed to

These remarks insisted from the outset that there be more elaboration with respect to the strategic alternative to espousing self-determination. How, exactly, Shachtman's reader asked, should communists handle cases of Negro rights with respect to organizations such as the International Labor Defense or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People? Should a united front be developed? In terms of the black petty bourgeoisie, alluded to only negatively, and characterized categorically as a key support for self-determination, Shachtman's document seemed, according to this critic, one-sided: "When there is such a considerable [petty bourgeois] element, then any program must deal with them specifically, either to secure their support, or to neutralize them. For instance, will not the Negro pb support, in general, the defense of Negro rights, and does not the existence of this group provide a source of potential revenue and influence for this defense, as has been developed by the NAACP? And can Communists also not utilize this?" In some ways, this class perspective on the nature of the struggle for equality echoed some of Trotsky's concerns with the "liberal" nature of framing "the Negro Question" within the borders of equality's realization. But it also insisted importantly that any programmatic orientation to the struggle against racism in the United States had to address the issue of the black petty bourgeoisie with considerable suppleness, something that Trotsky's comments to Swabeck on this matter sacrificed in statements of aggressive abstraction. Some of this petty bourgeois sector – those who worked in government service, for instance – were not structured into segregation in ways that habituated them to self-determination arguments. Elements of the black petty bourgeoisie, which was not a homogenous entity, could be won to see how Jim Crow constrained their material circumstances by "cutting them off from opportunities existing for the whites. ... The Communist movement must follow the proper tactics with the Negro pb just as it does with the pb in general. The draft would lead only to the tactics of 100% opposition to the Negro pb, which is undialectic."

Shachtman's critic continually returned to the view that the draft statement on "Communism and the Negro" too often lapsed into generalizations which were "quite sweeping and of doubtful validity." He or she questioned whether

be "made into a pamphlet as early as possible." In Chicago "Edwards, Oehler, Gould, Giganti, Goldman" "have declared their intention to go to bat against LD," with only Oehler calling for more clarifications around points of specificity, which included "an obsession on the matter of a thesis." Glotzer to Shachtman, 2 July 1933, Roll 11/Reel 3354, MS Papers.

it was actually the case, as Shachtman stated, that if the tremendous power of the Negro was “thrown in the scales on the side of the bourgeoisie, it will mean a sure triumph of reaction.” Undoubtedly true in some localities, the skeptical author of these remarks thought that this could not be the case in the northern cities where, it was claimed, African Americans seldom exceeded ten percent of the entire population. In such contexts, the only way blacks could exercise a decisive political influence was if a) the balance of forces among whites was evenly split among contending groups; b) Negroes acted as a unit; and c) blacks were active as opposed to passive in specific struggles. The caution contained in these remarks did, to be sure, threaten to dislodge Shachtman’s stress on the decisiveness of blacks in the class struggle, displacing this important accent and insight into a suggestion that what was critical was “the attitude of the Negro ... in the matter of the facilitation of the struggle of the white proletariat.” “Is this not enough?” asked the author of the remarks on Shachtman’s draft. Clearly it was not. But in raising the question, the commentator did note that in perhaps overstating rhetorically the decisiveness of the Negro, Shachtman could well “encourage in the Communist movement the black chauvinism which has not been unknown in the official CPUSA.” To guard against such overstatement and a rhetorical drift into the politics of essentializing national identity, Shachtman was challenged to attend more rigorously to the demography and migration of African Americans in the United States, assessing sensitively the material circumstances of Negroes in both the North and the South, urban centers, small towns, and rural regions. This necessitated an explicit account of material circumstances, including industrialization and urbanization in the South, and how significant the changes accruing from these developments would be for the region and for the nation as a whole.⁶⁵

Such an orientation prompted consideration of the class structure of black America. Just as the CP’s embrace of the notion of a Black Belt Nation homogenized blacks and understated, even ignored, the internal material stratification among African Americans, Shachtman’s draft statement too often “speaks of the Negro as tho the Negroes are a unit, and do and can be expected to act together in the class struggle and its revolutionary culmination.” Pointing out

65 Shachtman’s critic claimed, for instance, that in the South, and especially in the Black Belt, urban populations were relatively small and that the “small-city masses, proletarian and otherwise, are not particularly advanced politically, and can not be expected to develop much of a leadership character. So to look for much of a revolutionary leadership for the Negroes from the urban Negroes in the South is incorrect.”

that Shachtman's manuscript oscillated between acknowledging the class divisions of black America and suggesting, especially in its opening paragraphs, that there existed a demonstrable racial unity among African Americans, the reader insisted that "Marxism enters into the differentiations within groups in order to draw the political implications":

It seems to me that this introduction reflects the very view that the draft confutes at the end, namely, that the Negro problem is primarily one of Negro racedom, which then would center around some program for race freedom, which could well mean a Negro nation, and its self-determination. The draft speaks (p. 2, pgh 2.) of the 'unity of the Negro race with the white prol. and poor farmers'. Now what is the meaning of this? How will the 'race' unite with the white prol. & poor farmers? The white and negro proletariat and poor farmers and popular masses in general are moving toward unity (the white prol. and poor farmers have yet quite a bit of unity among themselves to achieve) and the white masses are moving to the support of the special Negro mass interests. But there are plenty of Negro elements neutral or hostile to this unity. Where can one put his finger on the 'race' as moving towards unity?

Unity, moreover, was not simply an issue of all blacks standing the same ground, but of how that ground would be occupied politically. Shachtman's critic saw the draft as too prone to present communism as "a white possession and development which the whites need to get the Negroes to accept." The need, in contrast, was to present the struggle for revolution as very "much if not more the concern of the blacks We should as whites not take a detached or proprietary attitude ... throw[ing] the draft open to charges of white chauvinism on the part of the author."

Many other issues were also addressed in this draft criticism, all of them targeting Shachtman's penchant for overstatement and generalization. Some of the points raised critically challenge the unpublished draft in ways that concede too much to the ostensible complexities of America's undoubtedly racist past. Could slavery be reduced only to "a hellish nightmare," asked Shachtman's critic, a perhaps overly fine point of contestation that was congruent with Oehler's earlier articles in *The Militant*. Acknowledging that this was not a "major point," Shachtman's reader queried what purpose it served to depict the conditions under which slaves lived in what he regarded as a condemnation that was "a trifle sweeping" and "non-realistic." Insisting that, "Slave conditions were quite varied, with some much less oppressive than others," the remarks on Shachtman's draft claimed that it would be sufficient to stress that, "at best

the slave was a slave, without his freedom, and at worst he was subject to terrible treatment.”⁶⁶ If this qualification seemed to too easily bury the brutalizing

- 66 In taking this position, Shachtman's critic may well have been relying on a slave historiography that, up to the 1930s, placed far more emphasis on benign aspects of “the peculiar institution” than is commonplace in contemporary interpretation. Then, too, arguments about the slave masters' potential paternalism order certain important slave studies, and might fit with the Shachtman reader's insistence on recognizing that slavery was not, for all slaves at all times, a universally terrorizing bondage. See, for instance, Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (New York: Pantheon, 1969); Roll, Jordan, Roll: *The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1974); *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' World View* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Nonetheless, were it not for the reader's attempt to relate such arguments to issues of resistance, the argument that *all* slavery was *not* horrific seems oddly misplaced. So, too, given the realities of slavery in the class/nation mix, did comments such as this: “If the Negroes are to be fitted into the category of suppressed nationalities, they belong more to the suppressed southern Confederacy than to a Negro nation. They were an economic part of the Confederacy, even tho an oppressed part. A nation does not exclude the existence of oppressed sections; on the contrary, a nation in the strict sense is characterized by a class structure, and may contain suppressed minorities.” Realizing that this way of looking at the United States and its national/class/race/sectional character was pushing in the wrong direction, Shachtman's reader followed this odd formulation of the Confederacy as a nation with the conclusion that “elements of national suppression found in the US are too incomplete, or too insignificant, or have faded out too much with the passage of time, to make the question of self-determination one which concerns the US internally.” Current literature on slavery in the American South establishes the decisive role of slave labor and the brutalizing conditions existing on the plantations, but it does not entirely displace the arguments of Genovese around the slaveholders' ideology. Justifiable discontent with Shachtman's reader's lapsing into representation of slavery's “complexity” that opened out into an interpretation of the slave South acknowledging the possibility of benign, paternalistic masters needs to be placed alongside recognition that Du Bois's monumental work, *Black Reconstruction*, offered the same kind of two-sided interpretive stand. However much Du Bois's analysis was premised on appreciation of the importance of black labor and insistence that “Negro slaves in America represented the worst and lowest conditions among modern laborers,” that slaves were the source of “immense profit,” and that slave owners sought such profit by “beating yet further down the cost of slave labor,” driving them to “kill the slave by overwork,” to organize the “interstate slave trade” and to the “breaking up of slave families,” with slavery subjecting slaves to the “cruelty, lust, and neglect of certain owners,” it also addressed other features of slavery. For Du Bois suggested that, “The slavery of Negroes in the south was not usually a deliberately cruel and oppressive system. It did not mean systematic starvation or murder. ... The victims of slavery were often happy, had usually adequate food for their health, and shelter sufficient for a mild climate.” See Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 9, 11, and, more currently, Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation, and Human Rights* (London: Verso, 2011). Recent writing of relevance includes Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2015), usefully reviewed in Robin Blackburn, “White Gold, Black Labour,” *New Left Review*, 95 (2015), 151–160; Walter

oppression of slavery in an undue attention to diversity, it was posed in order to raise other more substantive questions about Shachtman's account.

Was not the stress in the draft on slave rebellions as the primary vehicle of resistance, for instance, somewhat one-sided in its failure to "mention the fugitive slaves, who, while not acting in a mass, nevertheless also displayed great courage and fortitude. The individualistic character of escape does not remove the value of the escapes as indicative of the rebel potentialities of the Negroes, the almost insuperable obstacles in the way of any other than individual action were mainly responsible. ... The support of the fugitive slaves by the underground railroad, etc., would seem to deserve mention, and to have something of a lesson for the revolutionary movement. It was extralegal; it was a phase of the class struggle; it represented quite a degree of organization" Similar questions were posed about Shachtman's generalizations about capitalism and rising standards of living and about the role of African Americans in the Civil War and Reconstruction. Early sections of the manuscript were queried with respect to the emphasis placed on the alliance of blacks and the northern bourgeoisie, the argument being made that Shachtman overstated both the extent to which "the Negroes of the South [were] the decisive force in reestablishing the *national unity* of the country" and understated independent African American activities. "The Reconstruction is treated from the standpoint of what the white northern bourgeoisie did rather than what the blacks did." This kind of interrogation of Shachtman's draft was driven not only by pedantic concerns, but by a pressing insistence that the largely white revolutionary communist movement both learn from the experience of black history and address that experience sensitively.

Most telling were two suggestive final criticisms. The first posed a subtle challenge not to bend the anti self-determinationist stick too far in the direction of a politically obtuse rejection of the Communist Party's Black Belt Nation advocacy. Shachtman's critic wondered aloud, like Trotsky in his conversations with Swabeck, if there were not times when the refusal of self-determination and its replacement by the demand for racial equality, did not return to the old position of the Socialist Party, "namely, that there is no special Negro prob-

Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014). An earlier study that accents the industrial side of slavery that both Shachtman and his critic saw as critically important is Ronald L. Lewis, *Coal, Iron, and Slaves: Industrial Slavery in Maryland and Virginia, 1715–1865* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1979).

lem, it is all included in the revolutionary problem of the proletariat." Against this tendency, Shachtman's reader insisted that, "It is not the whole story that the movements for race equality and for the abolition of capitalist exploitation flow together. Those movements also have distinct aspects of their own which must have distinct political treatment." This brought to the fore, once again, the central importance of addressing adequately not only the black proletariat, but also the black petty bourgeoisie, something that the author of these remarks on Shachtman's draft felt that "Communism and the Negro" failed to do. "In some respects, the equal-rights and revolutionary movements do not affect nor appeal to the same Negro elements and must have distinct handling, even tho interconnected," wrote Shachtman's reader in what was an implicit, if perhaps unconscious, questioning of Trotsky's blunt statements to Swabeck. "It is not enough to condemn the non-revolutionary movement for equal rights as one of phrase-mongering, deception, etc. It must be met in the concrete manner of action in the field of politics. ... From the draft one would conclude that the activity of the Communists for equal rights is completely taken care of by the inclusion of the equal rights slogan in the general program of the Communist movement. This is not correct; the equal rights aspect of the question requires special organizational, and tactical, treatment, which the draft ignores altogether."

This CLAer suggested that although the "self-determination theory of the Stalinists is incorrect," it was not the case that the general principle behind the slogan could simply be ignored, a point that Trotsky also raised, albeit differently. There was thus a need on the part of communists not to subordinate their campaigns to reformist efforts to uphold the democratic nature of the bourgeois capitalist order, at the same time that they did not cavalierly alienate and antagonize those non-Communists (including blacks, both petty bourgeois and proletarian) battling to uphold democracy. "If self-determination were really essential to establishing freedom of the Negroes from white oppression, or even if it met an insatiable demand on the part of the Negroes, it would be a proper slogan even tho it did balkanize the South," asserted Shachtman's critic in conclusion. The problem was that self-determination would not establish equality for blacks in the United States. Even the declared sovereignty of a Black Belt Nation would be subverted in the power relations of a regionalized capitalist America, nor would such a Black Belt Nation address the segregation and discrimination rampant throughout the rest of the United States. There was, in any case, no insatiable demand for such a national project among African Americans. "The matter of the demands of the Negroes comes under the head of whether there is really a Black Belt nation," insisted the author of these remarks. The answer was that there was no such nation. In this Shacht-

man and his critical reader were in agreement. Nonetheless, this consensus of opinion was not arrived at through following the same lines of argument.

The final area where Shachtman's reader provided suggestive demands for revision related to what amounted to a dubious concession to the mythologies of nation formation and nationalism that concluded "Communism and the Negro's" case against the Black Belt Nation. "The revolutionary socialists, from the days of Marx and Engels to the present time," Shachtman wrote, "always regarded the precise determination of boundaries as quintessentially important in solving a national problem. ... The boundaries of the United States are quite well known, and they properly include all the present forty-eight states." Shachtman acknowledged that in establishing these boundaries, "the progressive advance of the ruling class, which fulfilled its great role by establishing a powerful industrial nation," was preeminent. Violence was of course committed in the creation of boundaries as expressions of governance – against native peoples,⁶⁷ for instance, and at the expense of the representatives of established and future nation states such as France and England, Spain and Mexico, and Canada. According to Shachtman, however, this project of national boundary formation was inexorably progressive, and established *nature's* political frontiers:

The present boundaries of the United States are its *natural boundaries*, created and fixed during the period of its progressive development, that is, they are *democratically determined boundaries*. The revolutionary socialist proletariat has no reason for destroying or violating such boundaries, for it stands for the fullest realization of democracy, which was brought to a stunted halt after a certain period of development, by the now reactionary bourgeoisie. This imposed the conclusion that even from the *democratic* – to say nothing of the *socialist* – standpoint there is no room for a national movement within the borders of the United States for the establishment in their midst of the 'state unity' of a Negro or any other nation.

For Shachtman's reader this was too much. Such a perspective on the borders of the United States could be construed as providing socialist concession to the

67 On native peoples, Shachtman's critic noted that, "The Indians display some elements of a suppressed nation, but the Indians were never a unit, but a number of units. The very small number of the Indians also keeps the Indian question from being one of self-determination." Contemporary comment would confirm the empirical reality of the diversity of indigenous peoples but deny that this necessarily repudiates sovereignty claims.

all-too-obvious chauvinism of American nationalism. The argument had about it the air of timeless inevitability, a kind of manifest destiny floating on a rather classless analytic concession to bourgeois power and a lack of appreciation of the arbitrary nature of national frontiers, neither of which were germane to a socialist repudiation of the Black Belt Nation thesis:

The draft calls the boundaries ‘democratically determined’, but such use of ‘democratically’ distorts the question. How can the term democratic be applied to the suppression of the Indians, the annexation of the Mexican territories, the suppression of the Confederacy? The point here is that capitalism has an aspect which is not democratic at all, but consists in forcible suppression and conquest. ... The boundaries of the US partially represent democratic (i.e. capitalistically democratic) fixation, e.g., the formation of the nation by the 13 colonies. But the boundaries also represent aggression, and the US displays the elements of the same features of suppressed national minorities as are seen in Europe, in the old Russian and Austro-Hungarian states, for example. ... Democracy is not synonymous with capitalism in general [and] ... territorially, the US is by no means perfect as an economic-political unit. Most of the state boundaries are atrocities The Canadian boundary has little if any economic basis, but constitutes an economic obstacle. Historical accidents were largely responsible for the Canadian boundary being where it is, and not merely the ‘natural’ result of progressive development. ... The draft ... displays a respect for and an acceptance of the boundary lines of the US which is neither in accord with the best interest of American capitalist economy nor of socialist economy.

The point that needed stressing, and that Shachtman’s draft missed, was that “The US does not represent territorially the fullest realization of democracy, but rather it represents a quite complete but not perfect realization of capitalist political expansion and unification.” To mystify this process was to put the argument of Shachtman’s “Communism and the Negro” on “an untenable foundation.” To attempt to “refute the slogan of self-determination” in such ways was thus bound to fail, and would open the CLA to “charges of general errors in viewpoint.”

Sadly, the internal factional climate of the CLA, combined with the increasingly difficult circumstances of the League in the United States and the Left Opposition internationally, shelved the insights Oehler, Shachtman, and others developed in tandem and against the deep-seated factional animosities of the dog days of early American Trotskyism. Third Period Stalinism juggled incon-

clusively the call for self-determination in the South and the championing of full social and political equality for African Americans that could alone win the hearts and minds of the black masses of northern industrial cities and the hybrid economies of the formerly slave South. Through its work in demanding trade union rights for black labor, struggling against lynch law (Scottsboro), and mobilizing powerful, integrated opposition to unemployment and other ravages of the Great Depression, the CP gained significant ground in convincing African Americans that it was one of the few political forces to reckon with in the ongoing struggle against racial inequality.⁶⁸

Cannon, Shachtman and others in the Communist League of America could barely dent this oddly unstable edifice of accomplishment. In turn, Shachtman's plea that Trotsky read his "Communism and the Negro" led to little. Trotsky promised to study the document and looked forward to learning from it. It was not to be. Shachtman and Trotsky never managed to open a discussion around "Communism and the Negro," even though the former was forthright in writing that "I am unable to agree with your position." Trotsky and Shachtman traveled together from Istanbul to Turkey in July 1933, but could not broach the subject of American blacks and the issue of self-determination, apparently because of other pressing concerns. There is no indication that Trotsky ever got around to actually reading the proposed pamphlet which was, given the political demands on the nascent global Trotskyist movement, put indefinitely (until the later 1930s, as it turned out) on the back burner.⁶⁹

The potential contribution that the Communist League of America could have made to addressing "the Negro Question" in the early 1930s was thus undermined. That Shachtman's pamphlet never saw the light of day in terms of contemporary publication was a complex consequence of inhibiting developments. Certainly the internal hegemonic hold of Stalinism and its perspective and practices in the struggle against Jim Crow played a role. But also important was the factional divide that stymied American Trotskyists in the dog days, when a breakthrough on the black question seemed imminent. International Trotskyism's understandable preoccupation with the state of its movement and what demanded attention within it undoubtedly put the issue of race in America to the sidelines. At the most subjective level, perhaps, Shachtman's own

68 For a sophisticated and nuanced discussion of the Communist Party and race see Michael Goldfield, *The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

69 Shachtman to Trotsky, 15 April 1933; 8 August 1933, Roll 3/Reel 3346, MS Papers; Trotsky to Shachtman, 1 May 1933, "The European Sections Will Not Support You," in *Dog Days*, 530; Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 64–65.

recognition that his draft, scrutinized impressively in fraternal critique by a factional opponent within the CLA, needed more work than had gone into its creation in a few months of Marxist analytic and literary labors in 1933 could also have had an impact. In any case, Shachtman was in Buyukada, Turkey with Trotsky in the summer of 1933, unable to oversee the publication of "Communism and the Negro." He wrote to Abern: "has my pamphlet completely disappeared? is it never to see the light?" In historical hindsight the query has a touch of the rhetorical. Shachtman's hard-hitting rejection of the Black Belt Nation thesis was destined not to be published for 70 years, until it appeared in a Verso edition introduced by Christopher Phelps in 2003.⁷⁰

To be sure, there was no question that the many discussions that had taken place within the American Left Opposition over the course of the 1930–34 years registered in a new consensus on a revolutionary approach to "the Negro Question." Central to this consolidating agreement was rejection of the Comintern's position on the "Black Belt Nation." This was evident in a discussion appearing in *The Militant* by one of the first black Trotskyists in the United States, Simon Williamson. It also surfaced in a contribution to the recently-launched theoretical monthly of the League, *New International*, by Joseph Vanzler, a young chemist/intellectual recruited to Trotskyism in 1933 at forums addressing Hitler and the German crisis, and who would thereafter write under the pseudonym John G. Wright.⁷¹

As the Communist League of America and the American Workers Party [AWP] prepared to fuse in the autumn of 1934, *The Militant* ran a two-part article by Williamson, who had quit the Communist Party sometime in 1931–32 to join the Left Opposition. A Kansas City activist in the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, Williamson fit uncomfortably in a mid-west CLA that had little to no experience with black workers and, as an oppositionist oriented to the CP, could do little more than challenge the Negro members of the Party to question the Stalinist approach to the "the Negro Question." He pushed for a new orientation, one that would embrace a "mass policy," but it was an uphill struggle. Elected as a CLA delegate to the late 1934 Convention where the fusion of the CLA and the AWP took place, Williamson's articles were written in this context, no doubt in an effort to convince the Musteites that the League had an

70 Glotzer to Shachtman, 22 May 1933, Roll 11/Reel 3354, MS Papers: "From a first reading it appears that you wrote the pamphlet in little more than one session and tired toward the end." Shachtman to Abern, 23 June 1933, Roll 3/Reel 3346, MS Papers; Phelps, ed., *Race and Revolution*.

71 On Vanzler/Wright see James P. Cannon, "Joseph Vanzler," in *Notebook of an Agitator* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 360–362.

orientation to African American workers distinguishing it from the Communists. Williamson's brief statements were a forceful repudiation of Stalinist ideas of black self-determination, calling on all Bolshevik-Leninists to "divert attention of all fellow Negro workers from the idea of Self-Determination for the Black Belt." Williamson wrote that, "The new revolutionary party of communism in America, a part of the Fourth International, must adopt a different slogan to that of the bankrupt theory of Self-Determination. This slogan ... should be for the full social, economic and political equality for the Negro worker." If blacks were to be locked out of the craft unions by discriminatory American Federation of Labor practices, barring them from the mainstream labor organizations of the era, Williamson suggested, then it would always be difficult to thwart the use of the black working class as scabs. The establishment of a Jim Crow republic, in Williamson's view, benefitted the black bourgeoisie, not the black proletariat. In this class analysis, "The American Negro ... is so closely interwoven into American custom and tradition that we cannot do him and the cause of world socialism or communism justice by struggling for a Jim Crow republic in America that will breed more antagonism among blacks and whites."⁷²

John G. Wright penned a decisive repudiation of the illusory and necessarily transitory understandings of any geographical fixation on a mythical Black Belt Nation in the pages of the Communist League of America's theoretical journal in November 1934. Wright placed interpretive and political accent on the mass migrations of black labor and the proletarianization/urbanization of the Negro masses in the immediate post-World War I era. He stated unequivocally that, "The Negro problem is and will be to an ever increasing degree a working-class problem; and the crucial criteria is the economic and not the geographic distribution of the Negro population. ... One thing is certain: there are no 'national' shortcuts to organizing the Negro workers. The basic slogan is that of *class solidarity* and not at all the slogan of 'self-determination.'" As Wright concluded, this position challenged not only the basic orientation of the Stalinist Communist Party, but also that of "race leaders" such as Booker T. Washington, for whom an

72 Simon Williamson, "A Critique of the Stalinist Theory of Self-Determination," *The Militant*, 20 October 1934; Williamson, "The Fight for Full Social, Economic and Political Equality," *The Militant*, 10 November 1934. On Williamson I have benefited from seeing the unpublished lecture notes of Christopher Phelps, "African American Revolutionary Socialists, 1928–1956," The Legacy of Leon Trotsky and US Trotskyism Conference, Fordham University, New York, New York, 25 July 2008. Williamson and Oehler aligned within the CLA, and Williamson undoubtedly would have been aware of Oehler's critique of the Black Belt Nation thesis and of Shachtman's draft criticisms.

alliance of blacks with wealthy whites too often pitted poor people against one another and obscured the responsibility of the capitalist system in fomenting racial oppression.⁷³

Williamson's and Wright's important statements were a culmination of years of sustained and rigorous attempts to develop a revolutionary perspective on black America and the class struggle. But they appeared at a time when many other developments, all of them pressing and demanding the immediate attention of the all-too-small and concentrated forces within the Left Opposition active in the United States, overwhelmed the Communist League of America. Consequently, an American Trotskyist perspective on "the Negro Question" never quite attained the solid clarity that it should have. The factors arrayed against its definitive articulation inhibited the elaboration of a comprehensive, coherently laid-out programmatic perspective on how black liberation in the United States related to class struggle and proletarian revolution.⁷⁴ One component of this broad process was the Communist League of America's turn to

73 John G. Wright, "Shifts in the Negro Question," *New Internationalist*, 1 (November 1934), 113–115, reproduced in Le Blanc, Palmer, Bias, and Pollack, eds., *US Trotskyism, 1928–1965 – Part 1: Emergence: Left Opposition in the United States*, 256–262.

74 It could be argued that the Left has lived with this failure ever since. Within the Trotskyist movement, subsequent contributions by figures such as C.L.R. James, George Breitman, James Boggs, Grace Lee Boggs, and Charles Denby wrestled with the relationship of the American Revolution, black liberation, and advocacy of self-determination. James, in particular, helped to consolidate a 1938–39 position, reinforced in conversations with Trotsky, that, "The advocacy of the right of self-determination does not mean advancing the slogan of self-determination. Self-determination for Negroes means that the Negroes themselves must determine their own future." See various James statements and Socialist Workers Party resolutions in Le Blanc, Palmer, Bias, and Pollack, eds., *US Trotskyism, 1928–1965 – Part 1: Emergence, Left Opposition in the United States*, 263–292 and 656–667. By the 1960s, a new context, in which African American articulations of Black Power aligned with the history of advocacy of self-determination, was evident. This resonated with George Breitman's *Marxism and the Negro Struggle* (New York: Merit, 1968) and Breitman's important engagement with Malcolm X and his political evolution, evidenced in Breitman, *The Last Year of Malcolm X, The Evolution of a Revolutionary* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968). See as well the wide-ranging collection of Breitman's essays and commentaries on his contributions, reaching from the 1930s to the 1970s in Anthony Marcus, ed., *Malcolm X and the Third American Revolution* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2005). Important discussions of these issues appear in works that address self-determination in non-Stalinist ways, including Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970); Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* (Boston: South End Press, 1983). Historiographically, a number of works espousing a "long civil rights movement" tend to discuss the Communist Party's strategic orientation to African Americans uncritically, especially with respect to the Black Belt Nation thesis. See Jacquelyn Down Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History*, 91 (March 2005), 1233–1263; Glenda

mass work that included significant efforts in the trade union and labor defense fields. Such areas were precisely where Cannon's influence was decisive and where daylight yet again dawned in the shadows of the dog days.

5 The Momentum of Mobilizations: Unemployed and Labor Defense Work

1933–34, as we have seen, marked a turning point for the United States working class. The revolutionary left rode a wave of mass agitation that finally broke through the variety of inhibiting forces that had constrained labor in America since the crash of 1929. Cannon and the Communist League of America, like other left-wing bodies, then pushed class struggle and resistance in new and constantly invigorating directions.

Agitation on behalf of the unemployed, for instance, was certainly a persistent presence in the early years of the Great Depression. The Communist Party organized Unemployed Councils in 1930.⁷⁵ Yet a broad movement of the unem-

Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008). For an intriguing anticipation of this fundamental politics of evasion see Harold Cruse, "Postscript on Black Power – The Dialogue Between Shadow and Substance," in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: From its Origins to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), 544–566. Two aspects of Cruse's postscript deserve mention. First, he insists that 1960s calls for Black Power were "essentially another variation of the old Communist leftwing doctrine of 'self-determination in the black belt areas of Negro majority' – but with certain innovations" (547). Second, Cruse also notes the centrality of Malcolm X and W.E.B. Du Bois in the history of black radicals who have broken from separatist conservative nationalisms, including forms of Black Power, to espouse a civil rights struggle turning more towards integrationist purposes. The Black Belt Nation thesis continued to be a point of contention well into the 1970s, especially in Maoist-influenced circles. See Harry Haywood, *For A Revolutionary Position on the Negro Question* (Bell Gardens, California: The Call, 1975); Harry Chang et al., *Critique of the Black Belt Nation Thesis* (Berkeley: Racism Research Project, 1975); Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che* (New York and London: Verso, 2002), 102, 134–135, 186–187, 194–198, 201. It was not until Richard Fraser redeveloped the argument of revolutionary integrationism in the 1950s that American Trotskyism rediscovered the perspective first articulated forcefully in the Communist League of America's rejection of the Black Belt Nation thesis. See *In Memoriam – Richard S. Fraser: An Appreciation and Selection of His Work* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 1990); Richard Fraser and Tom Boot, *Revolutionary Integration: A Marxist Analysis of African American Liberation* (Seattle: Red Letter Press, 2004). I have benefitted from discussions with Benjamin Blumberg and Michael Goldfield on these issues, although our views are all different.

75 See Daniel J. Leab, "United We Eat: The Creation and Organization of the Unemployed Councils in 1930," *Labor History*, 8 (Fall 1967), 300–315 and Franklin Folsom, *Impatient*

ployed was undoubtedly limited by the Communist Party's hegemonic hold on the jobless council movement and its Third Period reluctance to build united front mobilizations that encompassed other workers' organizations and left-leaning bodies to champion the cause of the unemployed. Animosity to the Left Opposition was at fever pitch within the Communist-controlled unemployed movement of 1930–31. In spite of the CLA's call to form a "United Front on Unemployment" in the winter of 1931, no headway in this direction was possible given the virulence of Stalinist antagonism to Trotskyists.⁷⁶ The Left Opposition did manage, nonetheless, to put forward aggressively a number of educational rallying points aimed at radicalizing the jobless. Both the six-hour day without reduction in pay and large, long-term monetary credits for the Soviet Union were promoted in the pages of *The Militant* and in a variety of unemployed forums and protests. If the former demand would obviously extend available work and protect the well-being of laboring families, the latter promised to develop trade relations between the US and the USSR, securing material aid and official recognition for the struggling Communist-led country born of 1917's Revolution as well as stimulate the lagging productive capacity of American factories. Such Trotskyist initiatives were opposed by Earl Browder and the Communist Party, which originally dismissed them as expressions of "social fascism."⁷⁷

Armies of the Poor: The Story of Collective Action of the Unemployed, 1808–1942 (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1991).

76 See, for instance, Tom Stamm, "The Unemployment Councils at Work," *The Militant*, 4 July 1931; Martin C. Payter, "Bureaucrats Sabotage United Front in Chicago Jobless Conference," *The Militant*, 29 August 1931; "Chicago Unemployment Conference," *The Militant*, 17 October 1931; Hugo Oehler, "Stalinists Again Oust Left Opposition at Chicago Unemployment Conference," *The Militant*, 24 October 1931; Arne Swabeck, "Unite Employed and Unemployed in Relief Struggle," *The Militant*, 31 October 1931.

77 Sam Gordon, "Labor Faces Year of Fight to Live," *The Militant*, 15 January 1931; Arne Swabeck, "The Communists and the Unemployment Crisis," *The Militant*, 1 February 1931; "United Front on Unemployment: An Open Letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of America," *The Militant*, 15 February 1931; "Police Raid Minneapolis Opposition Forum," *The Militant*, 15 March 1931; Arne Swabeck, "The Slogan of the Six-Hour Working Day," and Sam Gordon, "For Economic Collaboration with Russia," *The Militant*, 1 April 1931; Hugo Oehler, "The I.W.W. and the Unemployment Problem," *The Militant*, 15 April 1931; Albert Orland, "The Unemployed Cutters Rebel," *The Militant*, 15 May 1931; Swabeck, "Two Criticisms of the Six-Hour Day Slogan," *The Militant*, 1 June 1931; Tom Stamm, "The Party's Unemployment Drive," *The Militant*, 15 June 1931; George Clarke, "Cleveland Party and Unemployment," *The Militant*, 4 July 1931; "Half-Hearted Stalinist About Face on Issue of Credits to the Soviet Union," and "Bureaucrats Sabotage United Front in Chicago Jobless Conference," *The Militant*, 29 August 1931; "Credits for Soviet Union," 5 September 1931; "Credits for Soviet Union: Stalinists Change their Stand but Evade Most Essential Points," *The Militant*, 5 November 1931; "Jobless Spurned by Roosevelt, Hoover: Unemployment

By 1933, however, the catastrophic impact of unemployment was necessarily drawing a wide array of forces into a groundswell of opposition to how the scourge of joblessness was or was not being handled by municipal, state, and federal authorities. As Roy Rosenzweig suggested, for instance A.J. Muste and the Conference on Progressive Labor Action [CPLA] spearheaded an educational campaign to promote unemployment insurance as early as 1930. The local campaigns to organize the jobless that would come to characterize the Musteite initiatives of the early 1930s, however, really did not get off the ground until mid-1932. Impressed by the organization of some 6,000 Seattle families into what one commentator called "The Republic of the Penniless," Muste and the CPLA soon enlisted legions of the unemployed under their banner in the economically decimated industrial, mining, and textile communities of Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and North Carolina. By the spring of 1933, Muste's CPLA and its now buoyant Unemployed Leagues were the talk of polite, progressive society. "One protest movement that continues to grow, despite the Roosevelt recovery program," reported the *New Republic* in late July 1933, "is that of the Unemployed Leagues." Norman Thomas's Presidential campaign of 1932 had, similarly, rebounded to good effect in terms of a broad unemployed movement. It attracted many young and idealistic recruits, whose energies channeled naturally into the cause of fighting depression's ravages. The Musteites, believing that "the nation was in a state of civil war," were but one of many radical contingents in motion towards the politics of revolutionary possibility.⁷⁸

This volatile climate, and the actions it engendered around the highly public issue of unemployed protests, no doubt forced the Communist Party off some of its more extreme stands of sectarian isolation. The push toward united front action was also rooted in the failure of Third Period Comintern policies as they were being lived out on the ground of Nazism's triumphs in Germany. In this context the Communist Party, USA, like all such parties affiliated with the Com-

Insurance Must be Won," *The Militant*, 12 September 1931; Martin Abern, "The Slogan for Long Term Credits," *The Militant*, 28 November 1931.

78 Roy Rosenzweig, "Radicals and the Jobless: The Musteites and the Unemployed Leagues, 1932–1936," *Labor History*, 16 (Winter 1975), 52–77, which quotes "The Week," *New Republic*, LXXV (26 July 1933), 274 at 59; Rosenzweig, "'Socialism in Our Time': The Socialist Party and the Unemployed," *Labor History*, 20 (Fall 1979), 485–509; Rosenzweig, "Organizing the Unemployed: the Early Years of the Great Depression, 1929–1933," *Radical America*, 10 (July – August 1976), 37–60; James J. Lorence, *Organizing the Unemployed: Community and Union Activists in the Industrial Heartland* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Rhonda F. Levine, *Class Struggle and the New Deal: Industrial Labor, Industrial Capital, and the State* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1988), 59.

munist International and tied to directives emanating from Moscow, vacillated in terms of its approach to the united front. Tangled up in the contradiction of an instinctual Third Period sectarianism and a common sense understanding of the imperative of forging broad movements of opposition and protest, American Stalinists were inhibited in their fundamental insistence that they alone could lead the Revolution. The Communist Party was nonetheless forced to at least gesture toward the value of making common cause with others who embraced the fight against Hitler abroad or unemployment at home. But this fundamental political schizophrenia with respect to the united front meant that Communists were incapable of actually building genuine mobilizations of resistance in which they encouraged all workers *and* workers' organizations and their leaders to combine with them in a forceful strike against class enemies and their policies. The Left Opposition, as an external faction of the Communist Party, was forced to push and prod those who regarded it with such vitriol to embrace genuine united front initiatives (that would include Cannon and the CLA), but it was a losing battle. As Harvey Klehr has noted, even when the Comintern, in the early 1930s, orchestrated its "half-turn" to the united front, it did so in always uncertain and compromised ways. The highest expression of the united front was understood to be the moment when non-communist workers turned against their misleaders to embrace the revolutionary vanguard. Communist Party figureheads often espoused the united front from below, which meant that they appealed only to workers in non-communist unions and workers' parties while eschewing direct contact with actual organizations. If the "main blow" was to be directed against the capitalist enemy and its left cover, the social fascists, such a united front from below was truly effective when it maintained a "strict differentiation between social-democratic leaders and workers." This was a difficult balancing act to carry out consistently. Left mobilizations of the early 1930s in which the Communist Party figured prominently, with the Left Opposition invariably present as its awkward revolutionary conscience, were often a confused mixture of calls for united front action, refusals to logically implement such appeals, and even oscillating orientations to active intervention in class struggles. Most often, to be sure, united activity was conceived as being constructed from below, but it might, under certain pressures and in more opportunistic ways, be promoted from above. In such cases, the trajectory of mobilizations was narrowed to communications between Communist Party leaderships and bureaucracies, on the one hand, and select, leading figures in other organized groups, on the other.⁷⁹

79 For a brief account of the early 1930s Communist Party "half turn" to the united front

This was evident in the New York unemployed movement, one area where the Left Opposition exercised some influence. In January 1933, the Communist Party and its cadre in a few mainstream unions experimented, albeit briefly and incompletely, with the “half-turn” away from the isolating practices of an unreconstructed Third Period refusal to engage in joint endeavors with other radical groups interested in building a movement of the unemployed. Instead of insisting on the necessity of the CP leading the movement of the jobless into revolutionary activity, there was a somewhat aberrant push to create a more broad-based mobilization, albeit a “united front from below.” The *Daily Worker*, in an uncharacteristic expression of reaching out to workers associated with other left groups, appealed to, “The need for **united action of all workers of all shades of opinion and of whatever organization.**” In Chicago, this non-sectarian approach netted gains for the working class, turning back a series of proposed relief cuts and showing the value of united front oppositional politics. The CP-influenced New York State Trade Union Committee for Unemployment Insurance put out a call for a 22 January 1933 Conference at Irving Plaza Hall. This was championed by the Communist League of America as an opportunity to build a working-class movement that would pressure the state to implement reforms beneficial to workers (unemployment insurance, immediate relief, and the six-hour day and five-day week without reductions in pay). Broadening the class struggle in such ways provided opportunities to defend the Soviet Union and the embattled German workers’ movement, which had been brought to its knees by fascism. All of this extended the Left Opposition’s growth and increasing influence. As Cannon wrote in editorial notes in *The Militant*, “Up to now the strength of the Marxist wing of the movement has been revealed chiefly in its criticism. The opportunity to participate in a movement of struggle against the plague of unemployment places us also before the test of action.”⁸⁰

see Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism*, 97–117. For Communist International directive on this “half turn” see *Capitalist Stabilization Has Ended: Thesis and Resolutions of the Twelfth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International* (New York: Workers Library, 1932), 12–13; Otto Kuusinen, *Prepare for Power: The International Situation and the Tasks of the Sections of the Comintern* (New York: Workers Library, 1932), 87–88, 106; “Tactics of the United Front,” *Communist* (October 1932), 943. Note, as well, the Lovestone “Right Opposition’s” critique of the “half turn” to the united front, outlined briefly in Robert Alexander, *The Right Opposition: The Lovestoneites and the International Communist Opposition of the 1930s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1981), 85–86.

80 Storch, *Red Chicago*, 99–129; “United Front Call Issued for Unemployment Insurance: Opposition Welcomes Party Turn and Warns Against Opportunistic Tendencies,” *The Militant*, 14 January 1933; James P. Cannon, “The New Party Turn,” *The Militant*, 21 January 1933.

Openings of these kinds, coinciding with his political revival inside the CLA, reinvigorated Cannon, whose revolutionary energy now seemed boundless. January – February 1933 saw Cannon present no less than four Open Forums on Lenin, on the United Front Unemployment Conference, and on various trade union questions. He also announced an eight-week International Workers School-lecture series on American Labor Leaders, in which the CLA head would address the movements led by figures such as Terence V. Powderly, Samuel Gompers, Albert Parsons, Sidney Hillman, and William Z. Foster. In addition, Cannon spoke on behalf of the CLA at a forum of the Right Opposition Lovestone group, which appeared to be disintegrating. As we have seen in the last chapter, Cannon also addressed mass audiences in this period, speaking on “The Crisis in Germany” and “What the Left Opposition Stands For.” As a leading League member, moreover, Cannon kept up a taxing correspondence relating to the factionalism of the dog days, as well as producing documents for the League’s *Internal Bulletins* and articles for *The Militant*; he also drafted pleas for financial support for the newspaper and circulated them widely.⁸¹ It was Cannon at his activist best.

Cannon and the CLA intervened directly in the Irving Plaza Unemployment Conference, insisting that while the call for legislative action alleviating the plight of the out-of-work was necessary, it was not enough. Such parliamentary campaigns would only be effective if they were backed up with “the widest possible mass pressure of the economic and political organizations of the working class.” This was an explicit plea to take the united front from below beyond calls to workers by also orchestrating mass action through labour and left organizations. The ensuing demands would necessarily bring together both the organized and the unorganized segments of labor, uniting as well the employed and the unemployed. Class struggle, not political chicanery, must prevail. Cannon and the Left Opposition advocated conducting a “sharp campaign of exposure and criticism of the so-called labor representatives and their lobbying meth-

81 “Open Forum: Lenin,” and “Cannon Speaks at Right Wing Forum,” *The Militant*, 14 January 1933; “Open Forum: Report of the Opposition Delegates to the United Front Unemployment Conference,” and “Who Will Prevail,” *The Militant*, 21 January 1933; “Open Forum: Report of the Progressive Trade Unions Conference at Gillespie, Illinois,” and “International Workers School: American Labor Leaders,” *The Militant*, 28 January 1933; “Open Forum: What Next in the Needle Trades,” *The Militant*, 13 February 1933; and, for examples of Cannon correspondence, documents, and publications, Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 184–220. Cannon’s lecture series on “American Labor Leaders,” which speech notes indicated was indeed prepared, had to be “indefinitely postponed” as of late March 1933. See “International Workers School Notes,” *The Militant*, 25 March 1933.

ods behind the scenes with the politicians at Albany and elsewhere in order to secure a few cheap and meagre concessions for the unemployed." Skillfully promoting the necessity of united front action, and with subtle but effective prods, Cannon pushed Communists and others to abandon both sectarianism and opportunism. On the one hand, he negotiated the difficult terrain on which an unemployed movement grew by challenging the Stalinist left to actually open the doors of class struggle in the Great Depression to the entire working class. On the other, Cannon pressured more moderate and reform-oriented trade union leaders to live up to the promise of action they had so often falsely held out to their memberships. The results of such united front activity, Cannon insisted, would be an unemployed movement pitted resolutely against "the class enemy" and a mobilization that would necessarily separate "reformist workers from the influence of their treacherous, phrase-mongering leaders." Cannon wrote to his Minneapolis comrade, Carl Skoglund, that, "We scored a big success at the Unemployment Conference about which you have already been informed. It was quite a moment for us – the first time in four and half years that I have had the opportunity to speak directly to a Conference composed primarily of party people." The Communist Party spokesman, Clarence Hathaway, confirmed that Cannon had indeed registered some successes at the conference, utilizing the pages of the *Daily Worker* to denounce the "demagogic" leader of the Left Opposition. "Watchfulness," wrote Hathaway, was of the utmost importance in the movement of the unemployed, in order to "prevent the Socialist and renegade leaders, especially Cannon himself, from disrupting the workers' fighting front."⁸²

As Cannon later noted, the Communist Party was not yet ready to abandon the ultra-left sectarianism that so isolated it during the Third Period. It squandered the possibilities of contributing to the development of truly united front mobilizations. Instead, it was "dabbling with the united front" in its unemployed initiatives. The presence of Cannon and the Left Opposition in the early 1933 jobless agitation undoubtedly pushed New York's Stalinist leadership to tighten the reins on the emerging movement. In St. Louis, there were threats

82 See "Left Opposition Demands Broad United Front at N.Y. Unemployment Conference," and "Com. Cannon's Speech," *The Militant*, 28 January 1933; Cannon to Skoglund, dictated 24 January 1933, transcribed 2 February 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers. Hathaway's *Daily Worker* article is quoted in Cannon to Swabeck, "External Advances, Internal Turmoil," 11 February 1933, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon, Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 209–212. For further comment on Communist Party animosity to Cannon in the Communist-controlled Unemployed Council movement see Roger Goodman, "Interview with Herbert Benjamin," Unpublished Typescript, 1975, 70–71, 107–110, Columbia Oral History Project, Columbia University, New York, New York.

to “break heads” if Left Oppositionists did not cease distributing literature at a “unity convention” of the employed and unemployed. The CLA prevailed, however, as non-Trotskyist workers rallied to defend the right of the League to be present and put forward its views, which managed to carry the day.

The promise and potential of a united front unemployment movement, which so enthused Cannon and the CLA, nonetheless faded rather quickly. If the Communists were having second thoughts about broadening their approach to unemployed agitation, there were also others capable of nurturing sectarian hostilities. Within the upper echelons of the Socialist Party (SP), anti-communist prejudices had a field day. Shamed into action on the unemployed issue, the Socialist Party called for a conference on unemployment. It originally balked at participating in such a united front, but came to embrace the call for common action hesitatingly, aware that rank-and-file SPers were being drawn into conferences organized by the New York CP-led Trade Union Committee on Unemployment. The Socialist Party scheduled its conference for the Rand School on 25 February 1933. This date overlapped directly with the Trade Union Committee's plans to follow its own January and early February united front conferences with an already announced three-day Albany State Conference for Labor Legislation. Cannon's efforts to bridge the gulf separating the CP-led New York Trade Union Committee on Unemployment and its rival Socialist Party-organized Rand School conference came to naught. Against a knee-jerk Stalinist reaction, calling for a boycott of the Rand School event, Cannon moved a resolution suggesting that the Trade Union Committee continue its work in ways that had already been determined. Simultaneously, he also urged the body to send a delegation to the Socialist Party-called jobless conference and extend to it an invitation to work in common, since the purposes of the two groups were clearly the same. The unions and other labor groups represented in the Trade Union Committee were on record as endorsing “the united struggle of all workers and workers' organizations for immediate demands” to alleviate the plight of the unemployed. Cannon insisted nothing would be lost in sending a contingent from the Committee to the Rand School conference, and in encouraging labor organizations affiliated with it to do the same. Acknowledging that the SP conference was called to disrupt the prior initiatives of the CP-led Trade Union Committee on Unemployment, Cannon rightly argued that any “appeal to the socialist workers to boycott their own organization” was destined to fail. Rather, at a time when unity in the unemployed struggle was paramount, and when “the hungry masses are in no mood to tolerate those who stand in the way of a united struggle,” it would prove both prudent and politically instructive to do everything possible to build a united front of all workers and their organizations. This logic also contained within

it the possibility of exposing the Socialist Party leaders as disingenuous agents of disruption, whose real interest in building unity always sided with the labor bureaucracy rather than the Left-wing.

Cannon's strategic orientation thus pushed both the Communist and Socialist Parties to actually deliver on their commitment to a united front unemployed movement. Stalinists such as Cannon's old comrade turned antagonist, Clarence Hathaway, refused Cannon's approach. They mauled his resolution on the conference floor of a delegate unemployed conference in early February 1933. The Communist-dominated body retreated into sectarian denunciation: the Socialist Party conference should not be "strengthened" by sending delegates to it, which would only reduce the Trade Union Committee to its compliant "tail." Cannon's motion failed, 28 votes cast against to only 12 in favor. The unemployed united front that filled Cannon and his CLA comrades with so much hope, proved to be stillborn.⁸³

This was all too evident at the end of February 1933. The Socialist Party Rand School meeting ended in a clash of sectarian contingents. Cannon's motion to send an official delegation from the Trade Union Committee on Unemployment to the SP conference defeated, Communist Party figures showed up at the "rival" meeting anyway. Then followed a series of what *The Militant* labeled "Stalinist blunders." Marching into the Rand School, the "official Left wing" insisted that those present denounce their Socialist Party conference organizers and follow the lead of the Communist Party, whose labor committee on unemployment was holding sessions to discuss mobilizations of the jobless. With the *de facto* rallying cry of "our leadership or nothing!," "our conference or no united front at all!," this display of Third Period sectarianism scotched any possibility of building a mass unemployed movement. It also unleashed a series of "brutal attacks of the Socialist gangsters upon the Left-wing delegates." This demonstrated to Cannon and others, who had witnessed such violent repudiations before, that "the atmosphere of terrorism which pervaded the whole session are a natural accompaniment of Socialist bureaucratism – weapons borrowed from the class enemy and first introduced by the Right wing into the labor

83 On developments outlined in the above paragraphs see Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 104–114; Myers, *The Prophet's Army*, 67–70; "Opposition Demands United Front at Second Jobless Conference," *The Militant*, 13 February 1933; "St. Louis Unemployment Conference Adopts Left Opposition Proposals," *The Militant*, 27 February 1933. Other articles from *The Militant* that address unemployment issues during this period include: Hugo Oehler, "Unemployed & Barter Exchange: Petty Bourgeois 'Solution' Reflects Pressure of the Crisis," 28 January 1933; "Millions to be Jobless Permanently," 15 February 1933; "Homeless Youth to be Militarized," and "The Relief March in Minneapolis," 17 February 1933.

movement in the days when the Left wing first raised the banner of internationalism during and after the war.”⁸⁴

Cannon and the League struggled to kick-start the united front nature of the now precariously-perched unemployed mobilization. When the Communist-led Unemployed Councils of Greater New York rallied at Union Square on 4 March 1933, the CLA was present. It demanded that the movement of the jobless be broadened to include all workers’ organizations. Cannon and his comrades stressed that it was crucial to see the effects of the widening global crisis of capitalism as interconnected. Material defense of the Soviet Union and the creation of a militant united front capable of halting the death-march of the Nazis in Germany were inseparable from the need to agitate for unemployment insurance, relief, and the shorter work day within the United States. It was an uphill battle, however, and Left Oppositionists active in the unemployed movement were often subject to Stalinist thuggery or ostracized when they participated in direct action, such as rent strikes and collective resistance to evictions. At one neighborhood rally to return the furniture of an unemployed worker to his apartment after an eviction, known Trotskyists were mixing with Communist Party youth, ready to haul tables, chairs, and beds from a basement cellar back into the jobless workers’ home. A Party functionary appeared, however, and terminated the non-partisan proceedings: “Trotskyists cannot fraternize,” he bellowed, “and they have no right to move furniture with us – they are Left social Fascists.”⁸⁵

Cannon and the CLA, structured as they were into the Left Opposition commitment to function as an external faction of the Communist Party, had little option but to follow the Stalinist twists and turns on the unemployed front to their logical denouement. The Albany State Conference on Labor Legislation proved a disappointing end-note to four-and-a-half years of communist agitation among the jobless. It resulted in anything but the creation of a united front unemployed movement. The inability of the CP to actually embrace the

84 “Anti-United Front Policy Plays into Hands of Socialist Party Bureaucrats,” *The Militant*, 3 March 1933. The reference is to the violence used by the Right-wing of the Socialist Party to expel its Left-wing forces from a 1919 Convention. That sorry spectacle saw the Left-wing forces led by John Reed forcibly removed from the Convention by police, who were called to the scene by Julius and Adolph Germer, leaders of the SP Right-wing. For brief discussion see Draper, *The Roots of American Communism*, 176–178; Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928*, 98–105; Max Eastman, “The Three Chicago Conventions,” *Ohio Socialist*, 8 October 1919.

85 “To Union Square on Saturday,” *The Militant*, 3 March 1933; “Oppositionists Attacked,” *The Militant*, 6 March 1933.

possibility of a united front insured that while American Federation of Labor unions and Socialist Party locals were invited to attend the Albany gathering, few actually came. The contradictory mix of "united front from below" appeals to non-communist workers and actions that demonstrated sectarian, even violent, refusals to abide anything but leadership of the established Stalinist vanguard, limited how far into the working class the unemployed mobilization would reach. Of the 348 delegates assembled in the State capital, only seven came as representatives of AFL unions and a mere one attended on behalf of a Socialist Party branch.

As Cannon later wrote, "The shadow of this catastrophic failure to create even the semblance of this united front movement outside the sphere of direct Party influence hung over the conference from the first day." In his speech before those assembled in Albany, Cannon tried to inject a politics of realism, pointing out that false optimism about what a gathering of the vanguard could do only further undermined what it was necessary to build. Cannon advocated a united front movement of all the unemployed that could become a central component of "a great resurgence of the American working class":

we must discard any illusions about the real nature and composition of our conference. To talk as though the conference represented the unemployed millions of New York State, or even a numerically significant section of them, is a sure way of condemning all the deliberations of the conference to futility. The real class movement of the workers against the scourge of unemployment does not yet exist on any wide scale. ... There is very little doubt that the conference is ready now, without any further discussion, to endorse the most radical demands, and the social revolution too. ... In its composition it is a conference of the vanguard. ... The present conference has to be conceived not as the culmination but rather as a point of departure in the struggle to get a real class movement of the working and unemployed masses on foot. ... The tactic by means of which the scattered, separate movements can be welded into one, and the still inactive masses can be drawn into the struggle, is the tactic of the united front. The united front tactic aims to bring about common action of various workers' organizations, trade unions, and parties. It proposes their joint action in a common movement for immediate aims. It is addressed to the official organizations as well as to the rank-and-file members, and puts the leaders to the concrete test of struggle. ... The actions of the impoverished and hunger-driven masses ... must now primarily take the form of demonstrations which really unite wide masses in struggle. The appearance at the state legislature must not be conceived as an end in itself, but

as a means of popularizing and stimulating these mass demonstrations. ... On this road, the hesitating mood of the masses and their more or less passive discontent can be rapidly transformed into the impulse for active resistance all along the line. ... In such an event, and on the basis of a stormily developing strike movement, a demonstrative general strike of short duration is not excluded. The general strike, however, is not an agitational slogan for the present. An adventurous playing with the slogan of the general strike at the present time can only operate to prevent the development of the elemental workers' movement on the basis of those demands and actions which are appropriate to the present situation and the present stage.

As little more than an assembly of "second and third line functionaries of the Party and Left-wing organizations in New York City," the Albany Conference for State Legislation needed, according to Cannon, to commit itself to building the united front of workers. That alone could secure reforms and concessions to alleviate unemployment and pave the way to an improvement in the lives of all workers, both those who still had jobs and those who did not.

Instead, the meeting oscillated between adventurist calls for a General Strike and what Cannon described as painfully tedious discussions around empty gestures, defined by arcane understandings of what should become part of the language of legislative enactment. His call to the conference rejected by the entrenched Stalinist leadership, Cannon was nonetheless heartened by the reception he and other CLAsers received from the rank-and-file delegates. They listened to Left Opposition interventions attentively, read leaflets assiduously, clearly wanting to hear for themselves the politics of the Communist League of America. Nonetheless, the Albany Labor Legislation gathering was something of a post-mortem in the stillborn united front unemployed movement. Cannon's Conference eulogy was anything but a tribute:

As sad and pitiful a spectacle as one could expect to see in the revolutionary movement was the session of the conference devoted to the 'bills committee'. ... As if transported to another world the delegates, Communists almost to a man, who had expressed their real sentiments shortly before in cheers for the overthrow of capitalism, were put through the futile and ridiculous business, for many wearisome hours, of discussing and debating, line by line, the legal phraseology of legislative measures. ... Here was a picture of the doughty face of bureaucratic Centrism. Poised on a half-turn in policy, under the pressure of events and our criticism, the futile bureaucrats at the Albany Conference stood with one foot in

the mud of ultra-Left sectarianism and the other foot in the mire of parliamentary cretinism.⁸⁶

The Albany Conference was thus one further step down the road to the Communist Party's waning political fortunes in the unemployed movement. It perhaps contributed to a more generalized decline of revolutionary initiatives among the jobless in 1933–34.⁸⁷

In any case, the space that had opened briefly for American Trotskyists in the New York Communist-led unemployed movement was now thoroughly confused by the Albany Conference events and other developments. The ubiquitous Hathaway was quick to condemn Cannon and other Left Oppositionists immediately following the Labor Legislation confab. Particularly irked by reports that the CLA's agitation around Comintern blunders in Germany was making political inroads into the CP's rank-and-file, Hathaway denounced the League as a collection of "yellow curs." He declared that *The Militant* was enough to "make any decent Communist vomit," and asserted that American Trotskyism's counter-revolutionary ideas "should arouse a lynch attitude in all Communists." Such statements coincided with Hathaway's insistence that the Communist Party, and the Communist International, remained committed to a united front of all workers and organizations "against Fascism, against wage cuts, for unemployment relief and insurance." Trotskyist calls for united fronts, however, were little more than treacherous and disingenuous demands to subordinate Communists to the social-democratic betrayal of the workers. This kind of inflammatory inciting of hatred and violence no doubt contributed to outbreaks of Young Communist League gangsterism in Chicago and New York. A Left Opposition meeting in Toronto was disrupted and expulsions of Trotskyist sympathizers and unemployed activists were engineered in the Stalinist Marine Workers Industrial Union, the Brownsville American Youth Club, the New York YCL, and the Communist Student Forum. When a Communist-convened conference against evictions and relief cuts met, it excluded a CLA contingent. Unemployed demonstrations were now sites of "alarming disunity," as League leaflets were torn up by Party members, marches

86 The above paragraphs draw on "The New York State Conference," and "Com. Cannon at Albany," *The Militant*, 10 March 1933; Jack Carmody, "The Left Opposition at Albany," "Side-lights on the Albany Conference," and Cannon, "Albany: 3 Years of Party Policy," *The Militant*, 18 March 1933; "The Albany Unemployment Conference," *Young Spartacus*, March 1933. Cannon's speech, reprinted in *The Militant*, is also reprinted in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon, Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 222–225.

87 Rosenzweig, "Socialism in Our Time," 495.

were split into contentious Right and Left contingents, and speakers identified with non-Communist Party camps were routinely heckled. Such fractiousness unleashed a feeding frenzy of sectarianism that buried any possibility of creating a viable unemployed movement. Internationally, anti-Trotskyism was increasingly evident by June of 1933. A major Parisian Anti-Fascist Congress excluded the International Left Opposition, gagging those who would speak for its program, and physically terrorizing identified critics of Stalinism. For Cannon and the CLA, unemployment remained of central concern, but with the lessening impact of the Communist-led Unemployed Councils and the stifling of the united front of the jobless at Albany, attention also turned to other areas of class struggle, one important realm of which was labor defense.⁸⁸

Running directly parallel to the attempt to mobilize a united front unemployment movement in early 1933 was the revival of a "Free Tom Mooney" agitation. Mooney was a radical iron molder and member of the Industrial Workers of the World who had been framed and sentenced to death as a result of the bombing of the 22 July 1916 San Francisco "Preparedness Day" parade. His comrade, Warren Billings, was sentenced to life imprisonment. With Mooney's death sentence commuted in 1918, both men served over twenty-two years in California's prisons, before being pardoned in 1939. Cannon regarded the campaign to free Tom Mooney (who was personally more prone to take up agitation for his freedom than was the more reclusive Billings) as the archetypal struggle in the cause of liberating all class war prisoners. The Mooney case was central to Cannon's work in founding the International Labor Defense [ILD] move-

88 See, for instance, the following articles in *The Militant*: "Appeal to Y.C.L. on Slugging of Opposition Youth," 10 March 1933; "Hathaway Seeks to Explain Away C.I. Turn at Membership Meet," "Chicago Stalinist Again Try Gangsterism," and "Mink & Co. Expel 'Trotskyist' Seamen," "The American Capitalist Paradise: Hooverville, Part 1," 25 March 1933; "The American Capitalist Paradise: Hooverville, Part 11," "A Stalinist Meeting in Chicago," 1 April 1933; "Stalinists Beat Up Oppositionists," "Hathaway before Y.C.L. Membership," "New Expulsions in Brownsville," 8 April 1933; "Illinois Hunger March Smashed," 15 April 1933; "Two Expelled by Stalinists from Y.C.L.," "Chicago Meet Unifies Jobless Movement," "Move to Unify Unemployed in Ohio," "Organize Fight Against Mass Evictions," 20 May 1933; "L.O. & Stalinists in Toronto," "Unemployed Struggle in Youngstown," "Statement of Jobless Leaders," 27 May 1933; "The Jobless Movement and Political Parties," "Statement of Chicago Branch to National Jobless Meet," 3 June 1933; "Jobless Struggles Sharpen: Unity Need of the Hour," "N.Y. Anti-Eviction Meet," and "Demonstrations in New York End in Alarming Disunity," 10 June 1933; "New York City to Stop All Jobless Relief," 24 June 1933; "Stalinists Expel 3 L.O. Youth," and "The Paris Anti-Fascist Congress ... an Anti-Trotskyite Slug Fest," 1 July 1933; "Columbus Unemployed Confab Forms Dual National Organization," 15 July 1933; "The Columbus Conference," and "Hathaway Speaks on United Front in Brownsville," 22 July 1933.

ment as the leading united front organization of the Workers (Communist) Party in the mid-to-late 1920s. With Cannon expelled from the CP and banished from ILD work in 1928, and with the turn to Third Period sectarianism, tensions were ever-present as the Tom Mooney Molders' Defense Committee, the Communist Party, and the International Labor Defense jostled for place in the "Free Tom Mooney" movement. The Communist League of America championed Mooney's cause, castigating the labor bureaucracy for its role in working "hand in hand with the capitalists and the capitalist politicians, not only to keep Mooney and Billings in prison, but to put them there." Mooney himself issued calls for united front mobilizations on the part of all working-class and liberal organizations dedicated to securing his freedom, first on 20 August 1931 and then again on 21 January 1933. The initial early-1930s appeal collapsed on the shoals of Party sectarianism and isolation. By 1933, however, with the Stalinist "half-turn" toward the united front, new possibilities for Mooney, as well as Cannon and the Left Opposition, emerged.⁸⁹

The culmination of the 1933 "Free Tom Mooney" mobilization was a Molders' Defense Committee-sponsored Congress held in Chicago from April 30–May 2 1933. Controversy raged in the weeks leading up to the Windy City Mooney gathering, with ample evidence that, yet again, the Communist Party's commitment to principled united front action was necessarily compromised. Enthusiasm for Mooney's cause among a wide array of workers' organizations, including many outside of the dominant bloc of Stalinist delegates from Unemployed Councils, ILD locals, International Workers Order branches, and Trade Union Unity League unions, was nonetheless pronounced. The Party, equivocating as it did on the united front, proved incapable of containing its opponents entirely. In New York, it gravitated eventually to a position that endorsed appeals to the rightward leadership of the labor bureaucracy and the Social-

89 For background see Richard H. Frost, *The Mooney Case* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968); Curt Gentry, *Frame-Up: The Incredible Case of Tom Mooney and Warren Billings* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967); Palmer, *Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, esp. 252–284; and Sam Gordon's recollections in Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 38. Note as well, "Fight for Mooney and Billings," *The Militant*, 1 June 1929; Max Shachtman, "Mooney's Betrayal by the Labor Bureaucrats," *The Militant*, 15 February 1931; "Mooney Appeals: All Efforts Now for a Broad and Genuine United Front Move," *The Militant*, 5 November 1931; "The I.L.D. 'Acts' on Mooney: The Appeals for a United Front Evaded by the Stalinists," *The Militant*, 12 September 1931; "Stop Making a Faction Football Out of the Mooney Case," *The Militant*, 19 September 1931; "ILD Mooney Meet Ousts Left: Opposition Delegates Unseated by Bureaucratic Machine," *The Militant*, 17 October 1931; Party Member, "Silence in the Ranks of the Party on the Tom Mooney Case," *The Militant*, 24 October 1931; Herbert Capelis, "The Movement for Mooney in Boston," "Mooney Greets Soviet Russia," and "Engdahl on the Mooney United Front," *The Militant*, 21 November 1931.

ist Party, but stifled all Left Opposition motions that urged “open letters” and direct approaches to the actual memberships of workers’ organizations. Negotiations in the Free Mooney movement often took place between Communist Party functionaries and the upper echelons of the Socialist Party or specific trade unions and/or municipal federations of labor. Establishing the venue for the final convention, Chicago, was a case in point. Such backroom dealings had a dual consequence, according to Left Opposition critics such as Cannon’s protégé, Tom Stamm: they isolated the mass constituency of workers’ organizations from involvement in the united front; and they allowed the reciprocal treacheries of Stalinist and social democratic/union bureaucratic leaders to sabotage the movement to free Mooney. In locales where the Stalinist leadership was not so deeply entrenched, different outcomes might be achieved, especially where the CLA forces could operate relatively freely. The St. Louis “Free Tom Mooney United Front Conference,” for example, coordinated a non-sectarian set of events, including mass meetings in April 1933 and a May Day parade dedicated to freeing Mooney. Martin C. Payer, secretary of the local branch of the Communist League of America (Opposition) and a figure who had been active in a Molders’ Union-sponsored Free Mooney-Billings Conference in 1929, as well as in the 1931 mobilization to free Mooney, also served as secretary of the St. Louis movement building the 1933 Chicago Mooney conference.⁹⁰

Cannon, overwhelmed with League responsibilities and personal difficulties at this time, relied on others to carry out work associated with the Free Mooney Congress. Preparatory work in the Illinois coal districts around Mooney support was undertaken by Hugo Oehler,⁹¹ while much of the propaganda associated with the campaign in New York was ceded to Tom Stamm, a former leader

90 Tom Stamm, “Mooney Congress Called: Molders Committee Issues United Front Call for Chicago Meet,” *The Militant*, 4 February 1933; Stamm, “Stalinists Discredited at Mooney United Front Conference,” *The Militant*, 18 March 1933; Stamm, “A United Front from the Top?” *The Militant*, 1 April 1933; Stamm, “The Stalinist Shift to the Right,” *The Militant*, 8 April 1933; “Genuine United Front for Mooney Formed by the St. Louis Workers,” and “The Mooney United Front: The Negotiations Must be Conducted Publicly,” *The Militant*, 15 April 1933; Tom Stamm, “s.p. Sabotages Mooney Struggle,” *The Militant*, 29 April 1933; “Tom Mooney Conference,” *Young Spartacus*, March 1933. On Payer, Mooney mobilizations, and the emergence of the CLA in St. Louis see Martin C. Payer, “The ‘Organizers’ Who Disorganize,” *The Militant*, 15 March 1929; Payer, “Party Progress: The 3rd Period Hits St. Louis,” *The Militant*, 15 September 1929; “M. Payer Arrested in St. Louis,” *The Militant*, 29 August 1931; H.L. Goldberg, “St. Louis Opposition Active in Mooney Movement,” *The Militant*, 14 November 1931; Charles Mahler, “Results of the ILD Methods in St. Louis,” *The Militant*, 21 November 1931.

91 Oehler to Cannon, 26 April 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

in the Young Communist League and one of Cannon's most reliable, if inexperienced, allies in the center's office. A gay comrade who was undoubtedly somewhat private about his sexuality, Stamm soon graduated to becoming a leading Left Opposition activist in the New York unemployed street agitations of the early 1930s. In the summer of 1931 he was dispatched with another youthful Cannon supporter, George Clarke, to Cleveland, tasked with the difficult project of building a Communist League of America branch in the Ohio city. The National Executive Committee later agreed to send Stamm through the coal fields of Illinois to St. Louis, where the League local was in the process of reorganization, Stamm helping to organize a speaking tour by Arne Swabeck. He also figured centrally in labor defense initiatives and worked closely with Pioneer Publishers' manager, Rose Karsner, fund-raising and keeping accounts for the pamphlet and book production unit of the American Trotskyists. Something of an all-purpose contributor to Cannon's camp, Stamm routinely championed united front mobilizations and assailed the Communist Party's failure to live up to the promise of building wide-ranging movements of opposition and challenge. Among the posts that Stamm occupied in the 1932–33 revival of the American Left Opposition were business manager of *The Militant*, Bronx branch organizer, designated League organizer among New York teachers and, for a brief stint, member of the New York branch Executive.⁹²

Stamm's loyalty to Cannon was undoubtedly based on what would have been understood in the early 1930s as political agreement around programmatic issues.⁹³ It grew out of Cannon's practice of tutoring potential leaders

92 Myers, *The Prophet's Army*, 67–68; Communist League of America, National Executive Committee, Minutes, 3 June 1931; 17 July 1931; 24 July 1931, Box 35, Folder 5, GB Papers; Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 104; Stamm to Cannon, 22 February 1933; Gordon to Cannon, 24 February 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Tom Stamm, "The Unemployment Councils at Work," *The Militant*, 4 July 1931; Stamm, "Swabeck Meetings in St. Louis and Stanton," *The Militant*, 26 December 1931; Stamm, "The Opposition and N.Y. 'United Front' Unemployment Confab," *The Militant*, 20 August 1932; Stamm, "Unemployed Activity in Retrospect," *The Militant*, 3 September 1932; Stamm, "Unemployment Insurance – A Slogan to Unite Teachers and Workers," *The Militant*, 9 December 1933; Stamm, "The Teachers and the Class Struggle," *The Militant*, 30 December 1933; CLA, National Executive Committee, Minutes, 4 December 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers. Cannon offers a brief, positive recollection of Stamm in Harry Ring interview with James P. Cannon, Unpublished typescript, 8 March 1974, 13, in possession of the author [hereafter Ring interview].

93 See, for instance, Stamm's letter to Cannon criticizing Shachtman's about-to-be published pamphlet, *Ten Years: History and Principles of the Left Opposition* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1933): Stamm to Cannon, 1 February 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers. Stamm thought the pamphlet inadequate as an "exposition for American workers on the rise and development of the International Left Opposition," stressing especially "the failure to affirm with

and then giving them free rein in their political work, an approach to schooling in the revolutionary movement that Cannon himself experienced in his early handling by Industrial Workers of the World leader, Vincent St. John.⁹⁴ But the Stamm-Cannon connection may also have been deepened, in the hot-house atmosphere of Left Oppositional factionalism, by the differing ways in which the Cannon vs. Shachtman leadership contest played itself out around Stamm's homosexuality.

For Cannon, this would have been a matter of Stamm's "private life," something separate from his role as a *Militant* writer, soapbox agitator, and member of the CLA. When, at some point in the early 1930s, Stamm was arrested in one of the periodic sweeps of New York's cabarets, with those suspected of homosexuality jailed for their public display of "deviance," Sam Gordon recalled that some CLA leaders "were inclined to joke about the whole thing." Cannon saw nothing amusing in the arrest of a young comrade. "He earnestly set in motion the machinery to get [Stamm] out and cleared, enlisting the help of the comrade's uncle, who was a linotype operator on a Brooklyn daily. The case was finally quashed."

Shachtman, whose relations with young comrades had both a more ribald and homoerotic texture than those consolidated with the more reserved Cannon, was almost certainly one of those leaders Gordon recalled reacting to Stamm's arrest with crude and casual humor. He was known to pin obscene nicknames on young comrades, and to interact with them in intensely physical ways. Yet Shachtman was also, in his bawdy jokes and public persona, as well as in private correspondence, almost aggressively heterosexual. When he and Stamm engaged, a year after the Mooney Congress, in a debate over political organization, a Shachtman metaphorical quip revealed his capacity to take a dig at Stamm's sexual orientation. The two were crossing swords over the nature of political organization, and Shachtman noted that there were times in the formation of a left organization that it was "like a baby that has to be nursed." Stamm, who could be somewhat mechanical and wooden in his formulation and understanding of political strategy, replied with a stock-in-trade answer of revolutionary certainty that suggested his appetite for sectarianism: "Yes, but nursed at the left breast of revolutionary Marxism and not at the right breast of conciliationism and centrism." Shachtman, undoubtedly well aware that he was addressing a gay man, was quick to retort that he indeed favored nursing

the necessary emphasis that the Left Opposition is the representative of the proletarian interests of the workers and the party. The L.O. is not presented sharply enough as the continuum of the Bolsheviks under Lenin and Trotsky."

94 See Gordon in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 63.

infants at the proper breast, but stressed that such suckling should not be at “an organ of the body that’s designed for other functions.”⁹⁵

There was, indeed, no love lost between Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer, on the one hand, and Stamm on the other. At the height of dog days factionalism, Stamm’s detractors resented his willingness to write to branches outside of New York that the Shachtman group was responsible for throwing “the League into a crisis by the organization of a campaign of financial sabotage.” Shachtman wrote Stamm off in July 1933 as “one of the most venomous factionalists I have ever seen in or outside of the old Party fights,” and Glotzer labeled him Cannon’s “agent no. 1.” Abern denounced Stamm at the same time as the author of a “filthy and ultrafactional” report. Stamm, then, for a variety of reasons, was unmistakably aligned with Cannon in 1933. In the face of attempts by Shachtman and others to keep Cannon isolated in the New York office and to financially strangle his capacity to speak at the Mooney Congress, Stamm raised funds privately, in part through correspondence with long-time Cannon supporter in Kansas City, Shorty Buehler, to help cover Jim’s costs in attending the event.⁹⁶

95 On Stamm’s homosexuality and arrest see Alan Wald, “The End of ‘American Trotskyism’? Problems in History and Theory,” in George Breitman, Paul Le Blanc, and Alan Wald, *Trotskyism in the United States: Historical Essays and Reconsiderations* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), 266–267; Gordon, *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 66. For background on the homosexual cabaret raids of this era in New York see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 331–354; Paul Chevigny, *Gigs: Jazz and the Cabaret Laws in New York City* (New York: Routledge, 1991). The Shachtman-Stamm exchange is outlined in Max Shachtman, “The Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 1963, Number 488, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, New York, New York, 249–250, and is recounted as well in Myers, *The Prophet’s Army*, 231–232 and Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 173, although not necessarily with the interpretation I place on it. Jacobs, *Is Curly Jewish?* 34, attributes the Shachtman remark to a public exchange with Oehler, but Shachtman’s recollection of directing the barb at Stamm is undoubtedly correct, and accentuates the sexualized, even homophobic, dimension of the retort. On Shachtman’s character and youth see Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 42–44.

96 On the correspondence relating to “financial sabotage” see Shachtman’s motion, CLA, National Executive Committee, Minutes, 3 November 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers. Stamm’s factional place in the CLA emerges in correspondence republished in *Dog Days*: Shachtman to Abern, 13 July 1933 (570); Glotzer to Shachtman, 23 May 1933 (537); Abern to Glotzer, 6 July 1933 (557). *Dog Days* also details the Shachtman-Cannon impasse over Cannon engaging in mass work at the Mooney Congress and elsewhere. See, for instance, Cannon, “Concession on Organizational Questions,” 5 April 1933 (495–496) and Shachtman, “Response on Organizational Questions,” 7 April 1933 (496–497). On financial strangling, the Mooney Congress, and Stamm see Martin Abern and Max Shachtman, “No Financial Sabotage,” 23 January 1933, *Dog Days*, 403–411; Shorty to Jim, no date [April 1933]; Buehler to Cannon, no date [May 1933]; Buehler to Cannon, 29 May 1933; Cannon to Oehler, 26 April

The Mooney Congress was a contradictory affair. On the one hand, it showcased what could be accomplished in a genuine effort to build a united front to free Mooney and Billings. Approximately 1,050 delegates attended, representing roughly 700 workers' organizations, including 173 labor defense bodies, 114 local and central bodies affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, 104 fraternal organizations, and 83 unemployed councils, leagues, and other movements of the jobless. Delegates from the Left and Right Oppositions, Muste's CPLA, the IWW, and the Socialist and Proletarian Parties were present, as were representatives from veterans', farmers', women's, and African American organizations. Many of these non-Communist Party defenders of Mooney were actively involved in the Congress Arrangements and Presiding Committee, lending the proceedings the air of a real united front in which all tendencies in the workers' movement were represented. On the other hand, there was no denying the stranglehold exercised by the Communist Party, which controlled the powerful Steering Committee. Most of the 173 labor defense organizations and their influential bloc of almost 200 delegates were from the ILD. Many of the AFL bodies represented would have been Left-wing unions and their delegates Communists, while the CP's Trade Union Unity League unions were forcefully present, 117 in number. The 153 participants from just over 100 fraternal organizations were undoubtedly dominated by the Communist Party-controlled International Workers Order. The Communist Party's 43 delegates from some 29 organizations dwarfed the combined total of Socialist Party (4), Communist League of America (4), Proletarian Party (3), Lovestoneite Communist Party [Opposition] (3), IWW (2), Conference of Progressive Labor Action (1) and Labor Party (1) organizations in attendance. This dual character of the Congress – its appearance of reaching beyond the narrowing, hegemonic hold of Stalinism, but its confinement within that Communist Party grip – sealed the fate of this stage of the Free Mooney mobilization.

Much of the Congress unfolded as a see-saw over procedures and breast-beating proclamations about the justice of securing Mooney's freedom, a preaching to the obviously converted. The Communist Party would have pre-

1933; Cannon to Shachtman, 27 April 1933; Rose to Jim, 3 May 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Cannon, "On the 'Money' Question," 10 January 1933; Cannon to Skoglund, 24 January 1933, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon, Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 197–199. The factionalization of finances in the CLA in this period was exacerbated by contending claims on resources relating to trips to Europe by Shachtman and Swabeck. See, for instance, Cannon to Vincent Dunne, 20 December 1932; Swabeck to Cannon, 17 April 1933; Swabeck to Cannon, 28 April 1933; Rose to Jim, 3 May 1933; Swabeck to Cannon, 12 May 1933 and 15 May 1933; Jim to Rose, 29 May 1933; Abern to Comrades, 1 June 1933; Rose to Jim, 1 June 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

ferred to wind-up the conference after the second day, closing the event with a mass May Day meeting and passage of a manifesto that, in the words of Left Oppositionist Hugo Oehler, would have been “bursting with propaganda, but void of a concrete program of action.” This plan was scuttled by a “mass protest of the delegates.” The major scholarly study of Tom Mooney’s incarceration and the mobilizations to free him concludes, as did CLA Congress participant, Albert Glotzer, that, “The sessions were largely of a ‘purely agitational character’. Preoccupied with tactical hairsplitting, the delegates failed to settle on any plan to free Mooney.” Cannon and other Left Oppositionists actually had to lead a charge to “force the election of a Resolutions Committee, a committee the party ‘forgot about’ while they kept everybody entertained with propaganda speeches but nothing substantial on policy and program.” They also battled against Stalinist attempts to turn the Free Tom Mooney campaign into a Mooney-Scottsboro Committee, just as they refused the Lovestone-led Communist Party (Opposition) position that there was no relationship between the Mooney and Scottsboro cases. As Oehler noted, these mechanical attempts to either congeal separate struggles into one institutional expression or isolate them definitively from one another confused “the question of organizational and propaganda relations as well as the relations of different issues of the class struggle.” The Left Opposition resisted the Communist Party’s instinctual resistance to united front sensibilities with respect to relations with organizations such as the Socialist Party and the American Federation of Labor. It also critically engaged the established inclination of the leaders of such bodies to abstain from or undercut the radicalizing impulse of united front, left-led mobilizations.⁹⁷

In the complex negotiations that unfolded on the Congress floor, much fell to Cannon. He did indeed rise to the occasion. Cannon’s political acumen and long history in the labor defense movement placed the politics of the Left Opposition before the broad constituency of workers’ organizations represented at the Congress to good effect, as even Glotzer, one of the 39 Left Opposi-

97 In part because the Communist Party restricted information about delegates and organizations, there is no definitive information on those attending the Mooney Congress. But the contours of representation at the Congress are clear enough. I rely above on what Albert Glotzer referred to as “an incomplete report of the Credentials Committee,” which appears, as well as other information conveyed in this paragraph, in Glotzer, “National Mooney Meet Lays Basis for Broad Fight,” *The Militant*, 13 May 1933. See as well, Tom Stamm, “Lo Scores at Chicago Mooney Congress,” *The Militant*, 6 May 1933; Hugo Oehler, “Congress Sidelights: Political Notes on Incidents at the Chicago Session,” *The Militant*, 13 May 1933. See also, Frost, *The Mooney Case*, 443; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 102.

tionists in attendance, acknowledged. From the outset, Trotsky's view, according to Swabeck, was that factional obstruction of Cannon's involvement in such events worked to the detriment of the League. Cannon, Trotsky understood, had strengths that were best showcased in the workers' movement, rather than bottled up and kept on the CLA's factional shelf.⁹⁸

As Glotzer's appreciative article in *The Militant* stressed, Cannon's intervention at the Congress sounded "a different note" from the political vacillation and obfuscation characteristic of most speakers. Limited to five minutes, Cannon stressed that the Congress was not the culmination of the Free Mooney movement, but its beginning. The task was to broaden the campaign through local and district united front conferences that would result in a national and international Mooney Day leading to another Congress which would aim to attract 10,000 delegates. Insisting that only a united front of all workers' organizations could achieve this necessary end, Cannon's speech differed, especially in its accent on concrete proposals for future actions, from what was said by other speakers. Cannon argued that it was only through a true united front mobilization that made "it clear at every turn that all organizations and their leaders are invited to participate in the movement and that the door is left open to them even if they have previously refused," that the Mooney forces would grow. He articulated a strategy whereby it would be "possible to rally the masses of workers within the various organizations and give them the proper ground upon which to fight every attempt ... to sabotage unity." This, and only this, could free Mooney and Billings. Cannon's brief but effectively pointed talk unleashed those Congress delegates who were opposed to the Communist Party's "half turn" to the united front. Albert Goldman, for instance, addressed the Congress as a Party member dissatisfied with the narrowness of the Mooney mobilization. Goldman echoed Cannon's criticisms by noting that 75 percent of the Congress delegates were identifiable Left-wingers, arguing that there was a crying need to broaden the struggle to free Mooney by extending the constituency of workers and organizations committed to his liberation and exoneration. As Cannon later noted, this was a direct attack on "Stalinist policy" and, along with the Chicago lawyer's growing disillusionment with the Comintern's Third Period failures to adequately confront Hitler's rise to power in Germany, "prepared the ground for Goldman's expulsion" from the CP and his joining with

98 Glotzer to Shachtman, "Foolish and Petty Actions Did Not Help Us," 23 May 1933, *Dog Days*, 536–537; Swabeck to Cannon, 16 April 1933 and 17 April 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Trotsky to Shachtman, "The European Sections Will Not Support You," 1 May 1933, *Dog Days*, 529–530. Cannon's response to Trotsky's intervention is outlined in Ring interview with Cannon, 8 March 1974.

the Communist League of America (Opposition). So great was Cannon's credibility at the Mooney Congress that he was elected, against staunch Communist Party opposition, to the Resolutions Committee and to the National Mooney Council of Action. This Council was to aid the Tom Mooney Molders' Defense Committee and to broaden the movement to release Mooney and Billings after the Chicago gathering. It included a number of Communist Party members, as well as others like Cannon, civil libertarian Roger Baldwin, and CPLA head, A.J. Muste.⁹⁹

Cannon also concretely developed understanding of united front policies by challenging the Stalinist-moved resolution that to participate in the Free Mooney movement all involved had to agree that there would be "no attacks on organizations participating in the united front." The Left Oppositionists at the Congress quickly dubbed this a "non-aggression pact," and spoke against its passage, pointing out that it failed to differentiate between "two kinds of attacks, slander and criticism of policy." Cannon's Minority Report included an alternative to the non-aggression pact: "Each organization entering the united front obligates itself to discipline in action, but retains its complete independence and its right of criticism." The Left Opposition resolution was defeated, but it received positive endorsement by 63 delegates, the largest minority vote at the Congress.¹⁰⁰

Cannon's capacity to impress and influence non-Communist Party delegates at the Mooney Congress, as well as move thinking Party members like Albert Goldman in the direction of the Left Opposition, registered with factional opponents inside the Communist League of America. Mass work was

99 Glotzer, "National Mooney Meet Lays Basis for Broad Fight," *The Militant*, 13 May 1933; George Clarke to Cannon, 4 May 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers. Cannon's speech is reprinted in Stanton and Taber, eds., "For a United Front to Defend Mooney," in *James P. Cannon, Writings and Speeches, 1932-1934*, 260-261 and in "Motions Presented by Left Opposition at Chicago," *The Militant*, 20 May 1933. See also "Main Resolution Outlines Broad Program of Action in Fight to Free Tom Mooney," *The Militant*, 20 May 1933, and for Cannon's recollection of the Congress and Albert Goldman, *History of American Trotskyism*, 114-115. Goldman, whose Party name was 'Verblin' had contact with the Left Opposition early in 1933. See Glotzer to Abern and Shachtman, 6 February 1933, "Cannon a New Man in Chicago," *Dog Days*, 416; Oehler to Cannon, 18 March 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers. On Goldman's expulsion from the Communist Party see "C.P. Expels A. Goldman," *The Militant*, 8 July 1933, and on his joining the Communist League of America, Cannon to Glotzer, 20 July 1933; Cannon to Glotzer, 28 July 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers. A useful overview of Goldman's history on the left appears in "Defender of the Movement," <http://socialistworker.org> accessed 21 January 2011.

100 Oehler, "Congress Sidelights," and Glotzer, "National Mooney Meet Lays Basis for Broad Fight," *The Militant*, 13 May 1933.

indeed realigning American Trotskyists on the basis of the kind of principled Marxist politics that led to the formation of the Left Opposition in the first place. The factionalism of the dog days, however, was difficult to dislodge, and the Mooney Congress revealed this as well as the more hopeful possibilities of “unity in action” (which, unbeknownst to their Communist Party counterparts, applied to the Trotskyists as well as those who would build united fronts of effective opposition). Ground gained by Cannon in the factional wars dividing the American League during the Mooney Congress, for instance, was important, but some of this advance was compromised by an ill-considered article published in *The Militant* by Tom Stamm.

Stamm, swayed by Cannon’s performance and the presence of a cohesive and politically sophisticated Left Opposition contingent of 39 delegates at the Chicago Free Mooney conference, let his enthusiasm get the better of him. He fell into the trap of exaggeration and misrepresentation that had beset the Workers (Communist) Party during the farmer-labor party fiascos of the 1930s,¹⁰¹ and that continued to be the trump card of Stalinism’s fake accounts of its mass influence in the 1930s. Stamm put the original accent in *The Militant*’s coverage of the Chicago Mooney Congress on the Left Opposition “scoring” big. Rather than outlining the potential and possibilities of united front mobilization, Stamm stressed that the Communist League of America, with its “solid bloc,” put vital pressures on the policy of the Congress and elected Cannon to the “permanent national committee.” Stamm’s article was also a premature, overstated, and reckless intimation of the leadership of the Left Opposition in the Illinois Progressive Miners of America [PMA], a breakaway movement from John L. Lewis’s United Mine Workers of America [UMWA]. The young factional enthusiast thus threatened the fragile relationship that Cannon, Swabeck, Oehler and others were only in the process of consolidating, and that rested on the all-too-thin reed of the mercurial miner militant, Gerry Allard. Boldly proclaiming that the Left Opposition “carried the day” and that the Progressive Miners were the “decisive mass support of the Marxist wing,” Stamm substituted wishful thinking for realistic and politically astute analysis. Missing Cannon’s deliberate and cautious focus on the need to broaden the movement, Stamm’s coverage of the Mooney Congress suggested that the

¹⁰¹ See the extensive discussion in Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left* and the relevant material in *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism: Selected Writings and Speeches, 1920–1928* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 1992). Note as well Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 29–51, 96–126, and the more recent discussion in Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism*, 112–115.

united front was already established. Its revolutionary leadership was unmistakable: "What stands out, what 'thunders in the index,' what points the way to the future, is the fact that our 39 delegates represented 45,000 workers, therein is the measure of our strength and influence!"

For Shachtman and Glotzer this was too much. They had a field day pillorying Stamm's "scandalous report" and the ways that it subjected the Left Opposition to derision by rival organizations, such as the Lovestoneites. More seriously, they worried, and not without reason, that Stamm's article would damage the Left Opposition's important but still quite fragile work in the Illinois coal fields. The months-to-come would indeed see the PMA leadership take the first tentative steps towards a rapprochement with Lewis and the UMW, the path back into the bureaucratized union machine paved with the bricks of redbaiting and expulsions from the union of prominent left-wingers. Stamm's article was not, in and of itself, the cause of such anti-communist backtracking, but in the emerging tensions of mid-1933 it was difficult not to fret about the consequences of his Mooney Congress coverage. Glotzer was especially apprehensive about what the fallout from Stamm's sensationalized account in this precariously-situated PMA quarter would be: "Just such an article as Stamm wrote in the *Militant* on the Mooney congress would be enough to destroy our collaboration, as it undoubtedly will hurt us a great deal with the miners, anyway," he wrote to Shachtman. Neither Cannon nor Oehler condoned Stamm's error, but they believed the damage done could be rectified by more extensive and politically balanced coverage of the Mooney Congress in future issues of *The Militant*. Since Stamm was the culprit, Glotzer grouched, "the matter will be conveniently overlooked as a small incident." But the factional alignments and the resulting protection afforded Stamm was not lost on Glotzer and Shachtman: "woe unto us, if any of our comrades had been responsible for it."

The type obviously set on Stamm's article and its dramatic, large font headline stretching across the entire front page of the 6 May 1933 *Militant*, "*L.O. Scores at Chicago Mooney Conference*," little could be done. As damage control, it was agreed to run a brief prefatory statement indicating that the "sketchy news report" published by Stamm was to be followed by a full account of the Congress. This was to be written by Glotzer, complemented by illuminating thoughts by Oehler, a summary of the "great battle fought on the floor of the Congress by Comrade Cannon," and a reprinting of some of the Conference resolutions. Shachtman and Glotzer contented themselves with using the Stamm miscue as grist in their ongoing factional milling with Trotsky, who understandably was of the opinion that "such exaggerations are inadmissible in the League." Writing from Turkey, where he was engaged in discussions with

Trotsky, Shachtman reached deep into the rhetorical and factional well to draw up buckets of anti-Cannon diatribe:

I cannot tell you how humiliated I felt when I read *The Militant* report on the Mooney conference, and the triumphant sneer in the Lovestone rag. Allow me to say that I always tried, since the inception of the paper to which I am so fondly attached, to keep out of its columns that detestable spirit of bombast, exaggeration, self-praise and tricky headlines and stories that marks the yellow journalism of the Stalin press, to say nothing of the Lovestone step-child of the latter; and I think that I succeeded to a fairly gratifying degree. But when I picked up that number, it was like a stab. I could detect the author and the spirit of it at a glance: the phrase 'revolutionary-proletarian kernel' was written all over it.

As late as July 1933, Swabeck was trying to counter such reports to Trotsky with his own more positive spin on what had been secured by the Left Opposition at the Mooney Congress.¹⁰²

There were some immediate gains garnered by the Communist League of America, in large part because of Cannon's performance in rallying the Free Mooney troops in Chicago to a more sensitive appreciation of the need for genuine united front mobilization. Cannon's stature as an elected member of the National Mooney Council of Action provided him access to mass meetings in places like Kansas City, St. Louis, and Minneapolis. In Kansas City, Glotzer conceded, Cannon contributed greatly to the revival of the revolutionary forces, raising hundreds of dollars, some of which went to the Mooney campaign, with other financial contributions dedicated to the National Office of the Left Opposition. Over the course of a week-and-a-half stay in his old stomping grounds, Cannon was the principal speaker at a Free Mooney mass meeting; gave two public lectures on "America's Road to Revolution" and "The Tragedy of the German Proletariat"; oversaw the expansion of the League branch; and stimulated the creation of a Young Spartacus CLA youth club. In Minneapolis Vincent Ray Dunne wrote to Cannon prior to his late May arrival that a Mooney

102 On Stamm's blunder and the factional response many of the relevant internal documents and discussions have been reprinted in *Dog Days*: Glotzer to Shachtman, "Foolish and Petty Actions Did Not Help Us," 23 May 1933 (536–542); Shachtman to Abern, "Report from Prinkipo," 6 July 1933 (552–556); Swabeck to International Secretariat and Leon Trotsky, "A Possible Leap Forward," 10 July 1933. See also Shachtman to Abern, 22 June 1933, Roll 3/Reel 3346, MS Papers and the original offending article, Stamm, "L.O. Scores At Chicago Mooney Congress," *The Militant*, 6 May 1933.

meeting was arranged, and that "in the course of the Mooney and other semi-united front activities ... our comrades and friends have been very active and effective. The local Party people see in *every* public meeting where they leave the slightest opening, *our* comrades and *our* viewpoint in a steady march to greater authority." The ground was thus prepared for Cannon to successfully talk to audiences of hundreds of workers and Communist Party members. Left Oppositionist C. Forsen reported to *The Militant* that Cannon's Mooney speech at the Labor Hall, a united front gathering under the auspices of the Minneapolis Free Tom Mooney Conference, was a resounding success. Cannon appeared alongside representatives of the Farmer-Labor Party, American Federation of Labor unions, and the Socialist Party, speaking to an assembly of some 350 Mooney supporters. He also addressed a Student Forum at the University of Minnesota, linking Mooney's freedom with the general cause of workers' rights.

Cannon and the Left Opposition thus did what could be done to promote and extend the united front campaign to secure the release of Mooney and Billings. The deck proved to be stacked against the mobilization's growth. The California state and judiciary colluded to suppress the full disclosure of evidence that the men were innocent and, more importantly for the Free Mooney campaign, the Communist Party backtracked in its embrace of a united front strategy. By July 1933, it was more than evident that the doors were closing within the CP-controlled movement, and that bodies like the Left Opposition were finding it increasingly difficult to secure speaking rights to address so-called united front Mooney gatherings. Emanuel Geltman reported on a New York Mooney Conference. "So effectively did the steam-roller work," Geltman reported, "that even a non-partisan representative, the one from the I.L.D., who was nominated from the floor and received an equal vote with the other nominees was declared not elected by the chairman for the simple reason that the delegate spoke up for the right of the Left Opposition and all political organizations to a voice at a united front conference!"

From Kansas City a Left Oppositionist, Fred Simmons, wrote to Cannon at the end of July 1933, detailing how the noose was tightening on the Mooney movement:

Nell and myself are still active on the Mooney committee although, to tell the truth, that activity seems to be on the wane. For a while it was making very good progress in the K.C. Members of the committee were assigned to call on local A F of L unions in order to obtain delegates and we were met with a very gratifying response, obtaining delegates from about 16 A F of L unions within a very short time. Then, the Stalinists decided it

was time to start the revolution, and the meeting waxed hot and heavy with proposals and counter-proposals in an attempt to drag the committee into street demonstrations once every month. As a result, the A F of L delegates no longer show up and the committee has dwindled down to the C.P. and its auxiliary organizations, together with Nell and myself and a few C.P. sympathizers. In spite of all we can do this Committee insists on meeting on Wednesdays and particularly the last Wednesday in the month which prevents the L.O. delegates from being present as they are tied up ... that night – the last Wed. of the month being its business meeting.

In effect, Stalinism's "half turn" to the united front proved too sharp a renegotiation of political direction.

The Communist International, reemphasizing that relations between the revolutionary vanguard and the working class could be constructed only from below, issued directives to its American Party. Then began the winding down of the Mooney movement. In May 1933 the *Daily Worker* hailed the Mooney Congress as "one of the greatest expressions of working-class unity." Robert Minor heralded the united front efforts of the Communist Party to secure the release of Mooney and Billings as breaking through "the iron wall of division in the working class." But within weeks the Stalinists determined that the united front demanded too much of them. They had little interest in continuing the Mooney movement and were on the hook for \$1000 of the \$2000 deficit run up by the Chicago Congress. Mooney himself soon tired of his marriage of convenience with the Communists, whom he divorced in July 1933. "They have not had any official connection with my Defense Committee since last June," he wrote bitterly, "They became impossible to work with and I move[d] them out." By 1934 the Communist-led Free Mooney "united front" was flagging, and Mooney repudiated the National Mooney Council of Action to which Cannon had been elected. Even Cannon's old friend, the principled head of the American Civil Liberties Union, Roger Baldwin, conceded defeat: "The united front program worked out in Chicago has obviously flopped," he noted with sadness. Cannon and the Left Opposition, their efforts to prod the Communist Party to implement a genuine united front Free Mooney campaign having come to naught, licked their wounds and struggled to keep alive flagging hopes for a mass breakthrough in the coalfields of Illinois.¹⁰³

103 The above paragraphs draw on Glotzer to Shachtman, "Foolish and Petty Actions Did Not Help Us," 23 May 1933, *Dog Days*, 537; Cannon to Vincent Dunne, 20 May 1933; Vincent

6 Miner Militants: Cannon's *'Bona Fide Proletarians'*

One of the consequences of dog days-factionalism was, for better or worse, to deepen Jim Cannon's conviction that revolutionary work produced the best results among workers with a "firm, serious quality," those who had "the capacity for discipline and organization of the basic proletariat." The "half intellectuals and quarter intellectuals" of New York left Cannon increasingly cold: he was convinced they could only be "assimilated and serve useful functions if they were sandwiched in between a large membership of *bona fide* proletarians." This was Cannon at his most mechanical, but he was insistent, in early 1933, that the Left Opposition, including himself, had erred in "concentrating too much and too long on New York." Such workers as the League was able to attract to its banner in the metropolitan center came from "light industry, from small dispersed industries and trades and occupations." This had not proven to be the stuff of great gains. A recent trip to the mining districts of Illinois led Cannon to question "whether we are not wasting time" in placing so many of the CLA's revolutionary eggs in the socially weak basket of New York City. For Cannon, in this period of revival, the test of the League was to be in the area of mass working class struggle. "We have to show by concrete example what we can do in this field," he wrote to miner militant, Gerry Allard, "and the Illinois mine field is the best place to begin."¹⁰⁴

As the Communist League of America (Opposition) struggled to consolidate itself as an external faction of the official Communist Party, it necessarily intervened in discussions and propaganda campaigns relating to trade unions. Cannon tried, as we have seen in the previous chapter, to do what he could with the limited League personnel, to promote and advance labor struggles in Southern textile mills in 1929–30. The task was a difficult one, complicated by the reactionary stranglehold of the labor bureaucracy in the American Federation of Labor and the role of A.J. Muste and the Conference of Progressive Labor Action in playing what Cannon regarded as "the role of come-ons for

Dunne to Cannon, 22 May 1933; Fred Simmons to Cannon, 24 July 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; "Cannon Meetings are Big Factor in Reviving Movement in Kansas City," *The Militant*, 20 May 1933; "Mooney Acquitted; Evidence Muzzled," *The Militant*, 27 May 1933; C. Forsen, "Cannon Meetings in Minneapolis," 17 June 1933; Emanuel Geltman (Geldman), "Return to Narrow Basis at N.Y. 'United Front' Confab," *The Militant*, 1 July 1933; "Mooney Stays in Jail; Crook Free," *The Militant*, 2 September 1933; Frost, *The Mooney Case*, 443–444; Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism*, 102, both sources quoting *Daily Worker*.

104 Cannon to Swabeck, 19 February 1933; Cannon to Allard, 11 February 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Glotzer to Abern and Shachtman, "Cannon a New Man in Chicago," 6 February 1933, *Dog Days*, 413–414.

the labor fakers." The influence of the Communist Party, which so often failed to cultivate the unity necessary to secure working-class victory by maintaining isolating commitments to Third Period "Red" labor bodies like the National Textile Workers Union (NTW), did not help.¹⁰⁵

In New York, Cannon and a small Left Opposition fraction exploited opportunities in 1929–33 to press the CP's Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union to break down barriers to labor unity. The Trotskyists promoted one industrial organization that bridged historic divides separating entrenched AFL unions in the men's apparel and furrier industries and those sectors, like dressmaking, in which the Communists were more established.¹⁰⁶ Cannon himself spoke in the CLA-sponsored New York Open Forums of March – April 1930, addressing the crisis in the needle trades and stressing the need for decisive working-class leadership in all unfolding class struggles.¹⁰⁷

Outside of New York, class struggle erupted in the textile mill towns of Lawrence, Massachusetts and Paterson, New Jersey, as well as in mining communities scattered throughout Ohio, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and Illinois. These battles routinely pitted communist-led or independently-organized movements of dissidents, rallying in left-led unions or galvanized by opposition to ensconced union officialdoms, against both the employers and mainstream American Federation of Labor leaderships. For Cannon and the League, the issues were consistently posed as the need to build united front

105 As an introduction only see Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon, Writing and Speeches, 1928–1931*, 130–134, 172–176, 200–202, 205–217, 220–230.

106 See Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon, Writing and Speeches, 1928–1931*, 220–224, 268–283; Albert Orland, "A Policy for the Amalgamated Left Wing," Sylvia Bleeker, "Towards the New York Dressmakers Strike," and "The Strike – As We Go to Press," *The Militant*, 1 February 1931; "False Steps in the New York Dressmakers' Strike Preparations," *The Militant*, 15 February 1931; Bleeker, "Appeal to the Party Members in the Needle Trades," *The Militant*, 1 March 1931; Arne Swabeck, "The Strike Strategy of the Left Wing," *The Militant*, 15 March 1931; Bleeker, "Next Steps in the Needle Trades," 1 May 1931; Albert Orland, "Clique Gird for Spoils," *The Militant*, 15 August 1931; Orland, "Split Threatens A.C.W.," *The Militant*, 12 September 1931; "Left Opposition in Appeal to Needle Trades Workers for United Action in Struggle," *The Militant*, 23 January 1932; "Dressmakers Strike: Unity Against Common Enemy Imperative," *The Militant*, 13 February 1932; "New York Dress Strike Grows: Workers' Militancy Attains Unity on Picket Line," *The Militant*, 27 February 1932; "The Dress Strike Settlement: Some Lessons the Left Wing Must Draw from It," *The Militant*, 5 March 1932; "Burning Problems Facing the New York Dressmakers," *The Militant*, 17 June 1933; "NY Dressworkers Gain as Strike Ends; One Union Needed," *The Militant*, 26 August 1933.

107 See "New York Open Forum," *The Militant*, 15 February 1931; 1 March 1931; 1 April 1931; "Progressives Meet: Middle Class Impotence Can't Solve the Burning Problems of Labor," *The Militant*, 15 March 1931; Cannon, "The Communists and the Progressives," *The Militant*, 1 April 1931.

mobilizations that would bring all workers together in one coordinated strike campaign that could consolidate labor victories and mobilize workers through communist leadership.

As Cannon noted in the pages of *The Militant* in August 1931, the textile and mine confrontations revealed how decisively “issues of great import for the whole future of the Left-wing movement” were at stake. “The trade union question,” Cannon stressed, “is a life and death question for the American communist movement.” Specific struggles were revealing acute shortcomings in the strategic orientation of the Communist Party leaders. In Paterson’s silk mill conflict, the CP-led NTW tried to leap-frog over the much larger and more conservative mainstream union, the United Textile Workers, which received some support from Muste’s CPLA. Cannon and the Left Opposition argued that the need for militancy revealed that the only hope for striking workers like those in Paterson’s textile sector lay with the Communists. Yet the sectarian inability of the centrist Stalinist leadership to negotiate the united front needs of the hour left the Party handcuffed in the struggle to build momentum. As such, the militant mobilizations of 1931 were “a rehearsal of greater battles yet to come”:

The National Textile Workers Union is undoubtedly a force in the situation. Its strength is the strength of the militant spirit of the workers, of their profound and justified hatred of the U.T.W. officials who have sold them to the bosses more than once and their distrust of the field men of these notorious reactionaries and betrayers – the Musteites. The weaknesses of the N.T.W. is the incompetence and false policy of its leadership – that is to say, the leadership of the Communist Party. They shout against the reformists, but they do not know how to fight them. They speak of a united front of the workers, but by their tactics they defeat it. This is the heart of their mistake in Paterson. And by it they are entrenching the position of the C.P.L.A. elements and through them the treacherous bureaucracy of the U.T.W., and through them the bosses.¹⁰⁸

108 “Lawrence on Strike! Textile Workers Rebel Against Wage-Cut and Speed Up System,” *The Militant*, 1 March 1931; Max Shachtman, “Paterson on Strike: N.T.W. Must Take Initiative in United Front of All Silk Workers,” *The Militant*, 25 July 1931; “Miners on the March: Thousands on Strike Against Wage Cuts in Western Pennsylvania,” *The Militant*, 15 June 1931; “Miners Strike Against Wage Cuts and Starvation Conditions,” *The Militant*, 4 July 1931; “23,000 West Virginia Miners Are Out in New Strike Wave,” *The Militant*, 11 July 1931; Shachtman, “Paterson on Strike,” *The Militant*, 25 July 1931; Cannon, “Silk Revolt Growing,” *The Militant*, 1 August 1931.

In the coal fields something similar was unfolding. Shachtman called for the Communist-led National Miners Union [NMU] to coordinate a conference of the rebellious and autonomous miners' movements, and thus unite the various strikes of independent and semi-independent miner militants. "[T]he danger confronting the two big strike movements" in the textile and mine sectors, Shachtman insisted, lay in the "discredited theories of Stalinism," its Third Period sectarianism being "an obstacle to the path of development."¹⁰⁹

In the weeks that followed, however, repression of the strike movements deepened and Communist Party blunders only accelerated a drift to defeat. Two years later, in September 1933, little had changed: *The Militant* continued to suggest that strikes in the New Jersey silk and dye industries provided strong evidence of the detrimental consequences of the "fallacy of Stalinist paper unions."¹¹⁰ The problem of division was exacerbated in the labor defense field when a legal campaign of terror was unleashed in 1931–32, leaving miner militants, especially, at the mercy of courtroom charades. Stalinist inability to co-operate with other segments of the workers' movement in coordinated campaigns to defend all class war prisoners was taking its toll. This drew Cannon's particular ire. He led the Left Opposition's concerted efforts to expose and challenge all frame-ups of embattled class struggle victims. These included Kentucky miners charged with the shooting of a Deputy Sheriff during the Harlan County coal wars, who faced life imprisonment,¹¹¹ and Canadian Communist Party members saddled with five-year prison sentences under the terms of Section 98 of the federal criminal code, a draconian legislative hangover from the era of the Winnipeg General Strike that allowed the state to proceed against members of "banned organizations."¹¹²

109 Shachtman, "Mining and Textile Strikes in Danger: Stalinist Failure to Apply United Front Threatens Strike," *The Militant*, 8 August 1931.

110 "Mass Arrests in Silk Strike: Left Wing Makes a Half Turn to Unity," *The Militant*, 15 August 1931; "Mine Strike Called Off: Opportunity for National Movement Missed by Party Blunder," *The Militant*, 22 August 1931; "What About Paterson: The Stalinists Unload Responsibility for Their Bankruptcy," *The Militant*, 10 October 1931; George Clarke, "Paterson Strike Ties Up Silk and Dye Industries: The Militant Workers Recognize Fallacy of the Stalinist Paper Unions," *The Militant*, 16 September 1933; "Silk Strikers Hold Firm: Reject N.R.A. Truce – N.T.W. Forms Splitting Strike Committee; All Unions Must Unite in Associated Silk Workers," *The Militant*, 23 September 1933; "General Silk Strike Sweeps the Industry!" *The Militant*, 7 October 1933.

111 "Try 35 Kentucky Miners: Red-Baiting is Prominent Feature of New Frame-Up Attempt," *The Militant*, 22 August 1931; "54 Kentucky Miners Framed; 18 on Trial in Pennsylvania: Unity of Conflicting Defense Movements Needed to Strengthen the Struggle," *The Militant*, 29 August 1931.

112 Maurice Spector, "Anti-Communist Arrests in Canada: Communist Party Leaders Seized

In this context, as Trotsky pointed out in 1933, it was essential that communists establish fractions in the trade unions, conducting themselves with both principle and discretion. “[S]uch careful work in the unions should continue until the Communists have succeeded in proving to the workers that they are not Stalinist bureaucrats, obtuse ultimatists, but serious and able fighters who can be relied upon and who consequently are worthy of trust,” advised the leader of the International Left Opposition. Trotsky concluded that, “The more the influence of the Communist fraction grows in the union, the more boldly and openly will it fling out the banner of its party.” This was an approach that Cannon was drawn to from past experience, but it was also one that he increasingly struggled to integrate into the practice of the American League as he learned from Trotsky even in his own long-standing field of trade union work. It was an uphill struggle for the small and precarious Communist League of America to embed itself in the trade unions through the development of strategically oriented revolutionary fractions. Often Cannon had to juggle difficult opportunities in the face of conditions that were less than ideal, working with fractional allies incompletely assimilated to the consolidating politics of Trotskyism.¹¹³

Cannon particularly threw his efforts into the defense of three Independent Tidewater Boatmen's Union (ITBU) marine workers – Jack Soderberg, Thomas Bunker, and William Trajer – charged with a “dynamite plot” to bomb barges in the New York City harbor. In the face of Stalinist failure to immediately come to the aid of the accused, Cannon built a non-partisan defense committee. It was chaired by the Boatmen's Union's Carter Hudson, with Cannon's old anarchist ally from ILD days, Carlo Tresca, serving as Secretary. A united front effort, it drew in labor and left figures like A.J. Muste and the Lovestoneites Benjamin Gitlow and Israel Zimmerman. Rose Karsner assumed responsibility for organizing a women's group to defend the marine workers and to raise funds for their support. Tensions with the International Labor Defense organ-

and Held by Dominion Authorities Under Sedition Act,” *The Militant*, 29 August 1931; Maurice Quarter, “The Canadian Red Raids,” *The Militant*, 5 September 1931; “Canadian Party Leaders on Trial,” *The Militant*, 7 November 1931; Spector, “The Canadian Party Trial,” *The Militant*, 21 November 1931; Spector, “The Defendants Before the Docks in Canada,” *The Militant*, 5 December 1931; Cannon, “The Canadian Communist Trials,” in Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon, Writings and Speeches, 1928–1931*, 401–403.

113 Leon Trotsky, “Trade Union Problems in America,” 23 September 1933, *Dog Days*, 591–593; James P. Cannon, “Our Aims and Tactics in the Trade Unions,” 27 July 1923, in Prometheus Research Library, ed., *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism: Selected Writings and Speeches, 1920–1928* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 1992), 213–222.

ization's tentative approach to the case, as well as the difficulties of a small and tenuously-perched external faction of the Party, like the Communist League of America (Opposition), heading the united front labor defense of the arrested tug-and-barge laborers made the mobilization to free Soderberg, Bunker, and Trajer a treacherous channel to navigate indeed. Difficulties were compounded because the three accused ITBU activists were separated in different jails. Communication with and among them was both time-consuming and cumbersome.

Cannon's December 1931–January 1932 efforts were devoted to public speaking aimed at illuminating the connections of class struggle and capitalist repression, both at the workplace and through the legal repression of proletarian militants like the arrested harbor boatmen. At a Left Opposition Open Forum he lectured on the Canadian Communist trial, Mooney's bid for freedom, and the wage cuts being foisted on railway workers. Appearing at an IWW Forum, he spoke on "Class War Prisoners and Labor Solidarity." Finally, Cannon was a featured speaker at a mass meeting called in support of the marine workers at Webster Hall on 7 January 1932. Five hundred attended. Cannon was joined on the podium by Tresca, Gitlow, Muste, Ben Fletcher, an African American mainstay of the IWW among the marine transport workers of Philadelphia, and the anarchist editor, Walter Starrett. Cannon's old connections in anarcho-syndicalist and labor defense circles were clearly paying dividends; he was one of the few advocates of the Soviet Union, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the Leninist vanguard party who could debate and discuss a variety of issues with Lovestoneites, Wobblies, and anarchists and do so with credibility and charm. Years later, seamen would remember Cannon fondly, associating him with the defense of Soderberg.

The Marine Workers Defense Committee struggled valiantly to keep the three alleged bomb conspirators out of jail, but failed to secure their exoneration. Soderberg was slapped with a sentence of up-to-twenty-five years, and as an "alien" faced deportation upon completing his term of incarceration, a fate awaiting Bunker as well, who received significantly less jail time. The judge, perceived as seriously biased in his conduct during the trial, sentenced Trajer to the same five-to-twenty-five-year term that he imposed on Bunker. Cannon tried to convince Soderberg, Trajer, and Bunker to appeal their convictions, and that in spite of the ILD's "scandalous conduct in the early days" of their defense mobilization, there would be no criticism of the three marine workers accepting legal assistance from the Communist Party's defense arm when it was impossible for the CLA to provide it. His suggested course of action was apparently rejected by Soderberg and Trajer. They seemed to have a bit of the ultra-left distaste for all things legal. It was an inclination that could not help

but have been reinforced by the proceedings against them. "I don't agree at all with some intimations both from you and Trajer at times, that the appeal has no value," Cannon wrote to Soderberg, pleading later in the letter that, "I hope that both of you will seriously reconsider your hesitation about going through with the appeal. Without having any allusions [sic] about the outcome, you should at least take advantage of every small opportunity that is presented to reduce the time of your incarceration. This is the sensible and also the revolutionary point of view, in my opinion."¹¹⁴

The marine workers that Cannon defended so vigorously in 1931–32 were part of an underclass of harbor labor whose job it was to load boats in the daytime and tow them along the canal and river systems of the metropolitan New York-New Jersey waterways at night. Small boats overseen by impoverished, self-exploiting captains and staffed by a few operatives worked this harbor-connected network of watercourses. As many as 4,000 workers toiled in this sector, but they largely lacked the traditions of close-knit collectivity that strong unions in other waterfront employments utilized to good effect. Labor organization thus had weak roots among those who worked the tug boats and canal barges. Miserably paid at wages that fluctuated between \$65 and \$110 monthly, the harbor boatmen lived on board the vessels they worked, the cabins foul-smelling roach and bed-bug infested "coffins." The eight-hour day was unknown, as was overtime pay. Denied "the most elementary principles of decency and human rights," the harbor-canal workforce eventually secured a union foothold through the growth and development of the independent

114 On this labor defense work see Cannon, "The Marine Workers Tortured in Jail: Defendants Plead Not Guilty to Charges in New York 'Dynamite Plot,'" and Soderberg to Cannon, "A Letter from One of the Defendants," *The Militant*, 28 September 1931; "Marine Workers Defense is Organized: Militant Workers Rally to Defense of Soderberg, Bunker, and Trajer," and "Cannon to Speak Before IWW Forum," *The Militant*, 5 December 1931; "The NY 'Dynamite Plot': Marine Union Supports Defendants," and "Open Forum," *The Militant*, 12 December 1931; "Marine Defense Work Grows: New Forces Come to the Assistance of the Defendants," and "New York Forum," *The Militant*, 19 December 1931; "Marine Workers to Hold Defense Meet," *The Militant*, 26 December 1931; "Mass Meet for Marine Workers Defense," and "Protest Meeting," *The Militant*, 2 January 1932; "Marine Defense Meet," *The Militant*, 16 January 1932; "Statement of the Marine Workers Defense," 6 February 1932; Jack Soderberg, "The Jailed Marine Workers and the ILD," *The Militant*, 20 February 1932; "Marine Workers on Trial," *The Militant*, 2 April 1932; "Stool Pigeon Discredited at Marine Trial," *The Militant*, 9 April 1932; "Biased Judge Convicts Marine Workers," *The Militant*, 16 April 1932; "Marine Workers Sentenced to Jail," *The Militant*, 30 April 1932; Frank Lovell in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 133; Soderberg to Cannon, 24 December 1931; L.F. Sabbatino to Cannon, 9 August 1932; Bunker to Cannon, 27 September 1932; Cannon to Soderberg [?], 1 September 1932; Reel 3, JPC Papers; CLA, National Executive Committee Minutes, 10 February 1932; 11 April 1932; 6 October 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers.

boatmen's organization, which successfully pressured one of the companies to recognize the IBTU and only hire through its hall. Another company considered following suit. A whispering campaign of vilification, fueled by allegations of communist agitation among the marine workers, failed to stifle discontent. Fearing the worst, the harbor companies acted to squash the union successes. Soderberg, the Secretary-Treasurer of the IBTU, attributed the fabrication of the "dynamite plot" and the subsequent legal frame-up to the growing militancy of the independent labor body, which was threatening strike action in January 1932. "Our crime," wrote Soderberg, was "trying, by organization, to rectify ... wrongs ... and to gain for the members of the union an equal and decent scale of wages."¹¹⁵

The marine workers, then, were not atypical of the kinds of workforces that Cannon saw as characteristic of New York City: dispersed, too often laboring in small, sometimes transient, workplaces, the boatmen's consciousness was determined by a particular kind of social being. Like the hotel workers, among whom, as we shall see below, the Left Opposition also cultivated ties, these kinds of workers had limitations in terms of what a revolutionary organization could achieve among them. Working-class struggle in New York seemed dominated by needle trades workers, upholsterers, furriers, and pocketbook and doll makers. Class conflicts in such sectors understandably secured the support of the Communist League of America, all the moreso in the throes of the dog days, when the possibilities of mass work seemed slim indeed. But the limitations imposed on active engagement in workplace struggles of these kinds explained why Cannon would look to militant miners as an exceedingly attractive constituency in which to promote the cause of revolutionary Trotskyism.¹¹⁶

Dissident miners' movements had been something of a mother's milk in Cannon's development as a communist. As editor of the *Kansas City Workers' World*, Cannon was arrested in 1919 for his agitation in the coal fields, charged with conspiracy to "obstruct, hinder and delay the production of bituminous coal" and with giving speeches and publishing articles calculated to "inflamm

115 Jack Soderberg, "The Exploitation of the New York Harbor Boatmen," *The Militant*, 12 December 1931.

116 On class struggle in these New York sectors that drew the attention and support of the CLA see "Wave of Militant Struggles Sweeps Needle Trades," and "Attack on Furriers' Union," *The Militant*, 27 May 1932; Carl Cowl and Sol Lankin, "New York Upholsterers Strike Spreads to New Shops," *The Militant*, 5 August 1933; "N.Y. Furniture Strikers Repulse Maneuvers of the Employers," *The Militant*, 26 August 1932; "Doll Workers Strike in Trenton," *Young Spartacus*, June 1933; "Toy Workers Win Strike," *Young Spartacus*, July 1933; "Pocketbook Strikers Win Demands from Morris White Co. in Struggle," *The Militant*, 8 July 1933; "Pocketbook Workers Struggle," *The Militant*, 15 July 1933.

the minds of the miners against their officials.” Cannon’s connection to rebel Kansas coal mining leader, Alexander Howat, reached across the 1920s. Along with Swabeck, Dunne, Abern, and others in his faction, Cannon saw the importance of the opposition mounted against John L. Lewis and the United Mine Workers of America bureaucracy by miner militants in the late 1920s. The Cannon group tried, unsuccessfully, to cajole the reluctant Lovestone leadership of the Party, as well as the William Z. Foster trade union contingent, to cast its weight behind the “Save the Union” movement in the UMWA during 1927–28. It suggested that if a national miners’ conference was called it could well establish the basis for a new union in the industry.¹¹⁷ Indeed, the birth of the Left Opposition over the course of late 1928 and 1929, coincided with new initiatives on the part of Swabeck-influenced rebel miners in the UMWA’s District 12, the Illinois coal fields where there was a hint of Trotskyism’s message taking root among the disgruntled miners.¹¹⁸

The rash of expulsions associated with the Cannon, Shachtman, and Abern exit from the Party in 1928, as we have seen in an earlier chapter, included the dumping of Gerry Allard from membership. Allard, a veteran of the Illinois “Save the Union” revolt against Lewis and the UMWA machine, faced ostracism in his home state, relocating to Colorado. There he was a dissident miners’ leader, an organizer of strikes, and much reviled by the coal magnates. He received notice of expulsion from the Communist Party, ironically, through the clandestine budding Left Oppositionist, Hugo Oehler, then District Organizer of the Rocky Mountain section. Allard’s expulsion was protested by a contingent of seven Springfield, Illinois leaders of the Communist-led National Miners Union, who rejected “the splitting bureaucratic policy of expulsions from the Party for political views.” One of these Party malcontents was Joseph Angelo, who would likewise be suspended for three months by the Chicago District Executive Committee, “without even the formality of a trial, and without having been given the opportunity of stating his views in any respect in regards to the present controversy in the Party.” Angelo would become a founding member of the Communist League of America (Opposition), and an influence on Allard as he returned to Illinois.

The Springfield group condemned the expulsions/suspensions as “a reproduction of the corrupt officialdom of the old reactionary bureaucracy of the

117 Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 107–112, 308–312; *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*, esp. 544–558.

118 *Dog Days*, 63; Swabeck, “The Struggle in the Coal Fields,” *The Militant*, 1 February 1929; Swabeck, “The Illinois Miners Convention,” *The Militant*, 11 April 1929.

trade unions,” noting that rebel miners vigorously fought such heavy-handedness in the UMWA. Party members in the coal fields were adamant that such “factional, bureaucratic, and clique” methods had no place in the Communist movement. In as much as the expulsions and suspensions happened as a result of what was known as “Trotskyism,” the NMU activists argued that this was merely a smokescreen. Little was known among the rank-and-file about the politics of the Left Opposition. It was the duty of all communists, they argued forcefully, to resist intimidation and demand open discussion. They insisted that “both sides of the question” needed to be “fully represented and all documents bearing on the subject made available to the membership.” From these small beginnings emerged a fragile Trotskyist presence in central Illinois coal towns: militant miners provided a defense guard at the founding conference of the Communist League of America (Opposition) in Chicago in 1929, and League branches would eventually emerge in Springfield and Staunton.¹¹⁹

Angelo soon became the mainstay of the League among Illinois miners.¹²⁰ From his Springfield base he battled the tyrannical Lewis machine and the UMWA. He also crossed swords with a contingent of home-grown labor fakers headed by Harry Fishwick, Frank Farrington, and Illinois Federation of Labor President John A. (‘Weeping Jack’) Walker, who were often backed by Muste’s CPLA. The leadership of the Communist NMU which, although it rarely competed directly with the UWMA, flexed what muscle it could muster in locales where the miners were unorganized or where mainstream unionism was weak, routinely lapsed into stands that threatened to leave the dissident miners’ movement stranded in sectarianism. In this ongoing battle, crisscrossed as it was in complex political differentiation, the odor of corruption wafted over the coal fields, disfiguring the class struggle throughout the 1929–34 years.

Gerry Allard was one of the first casualties. Given the prototypical heave-ho by the Communist Party for coming to Cannon’s defense in 1928, Allard

119 For these Illinois developments see Albert Glotzer, “Reminiscences of JPC,” Unpublished typescript, Box 2, File 14, JPC Papers; George Voyzey et al., “Miners Protest the Expulsions,” and Gerry Allard, “An Expelled Miner,” *The Militant*, 1 February 1929. The notion that Trotskyism was a “smokescreen” in terms of the expulsions was commonly put forward in early Left Opposition circles. See “The ‘Smokescreen’ of Trotskyism,” *The Militant*, 15 February 1929. On League branches in Springfield and Staunton see Glotzer to Shachtman, 4 June 1933, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers; Cannon to Angelo, 15 March 1933; Oehler to Cannon, 29 May 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

120 For early Left Opposition correspondence from Joe Angelo on mine issues in Illinois see Angelo to Swabeck, 25 March 1931, enclosing “Proposed Policy in the Illinois Miners’ Situation,” and Angelo to Swabeck, 28 March 1931, Reel 20, JPC Papers.

was won back into the ranks of the Stalinists by his long-time friend, William Z. Foster. Foster argued that there was a much greater chance of engaging in mass work among the Illinois miners in the NMU than there ever could be as a member of the small and isolated Left Opposition. Cannon recognized Allard's gifts as a militant leader of the miners, but was aware of how attractive the lure of active leadership in the class struggle could be, especially to someone like the NMU leader, who was always slow to assimilate the politics of revolutionary Marxism. It was only a matter of months before Allard was back in the Stalinist fold. Cannon concluded that "a principled and international orientation" was the only foundation on which a true Left Oppositionist could sustain him or herself. To his friend and comrade, Vincent Dunne, Cannon wrote at the end of 1930 that, "our first capitulator, Gerry Allard, should not be forgotten. He broke with us, and quite honestly, I believe, because he wanted to engage in the 'mass work' of the party in southern Illinois. His defense of our platform placed obstacles in the way of his design. So, instead of fighting to penetrate the mass work with our ideas he renounced them, mistaking the right to rub elbows freely with a bigger crowd of people for Bolshevik work among the masses."

Allard's move to mass work was destined to reap what the Stalinists would fatefully sow. An ill-thought-out and poorly-executed NMU strike left the Illinois miners in its ranks defeated, paving the way to an invigorated anti-communist atmosphere in the coal fields, further entrenchment of ossified labor bureaucracies, and an ongoing malaise among the district's Party members and the dual union they sustained. The Left Opposition supported the December 1929 NMU strike but pointed to strategic weaknesses in the Stalinist policies and practices among the miners. Allard himself was left, according to Cannon, "back where he started, disillusioned and discouraged, with nothing to show but a trail of ruin among the miners."

Amidst this wreckage, Allard began to have second thoughts. In mid-February 1931, he acknowledged the "absence of a real functioning Communist party in the Illinois coal fields." He appreciated that the losses suffered constituted "a calamity" for the working class and its "revolutionary movement." Pointing to one coal-producing county in the aftermath of the disastrous December 1929 strike defeat, Allard noted that the Party once boasted some 400 members in the district, with the NMU enrolling 5000 miners in its ranks. Allard took a look around the county and saw "the complete collapse of the Party apparatus, and the non-functioning of a single union local." Six months later Allard reapplied for membership in the CLA. Cannon, ever the optimist when a miner militant of Allard's proven leadership capacities was concerned, endorsed the Illinois dissident's readmission to the Communist League

of America, vouching for his “seriousness and good faith.” It was an understandable and generous position, but one that would not be without its rough repercussions.¹²¹

Allard’s rejoining of the Left Opposition was undoubtedly a minor episode in the history of the National Miners Union, but it highlighted how militants might abandon the sinking ship of “Red” dual unionism, especially if there was a political alternative such as the Communist League of America (Opposition). To be sure, NMU strikes, such as the conflict in the Pennsylvania coal fields over the course of the spring and summer of 1931, helped keep traditions of militancy alive in a declining bituminous coal industry, which appeared to be scraping rock bottom in the depths of the Depression. The wage-cut became endemic. Such strikes also demonstrated the vitality and unique importance of biracial unionism. They also, unfortunately, unleashed rabid repression, often culminating in the reestablishment of Lewis’s United Mine Workers of America as the union recognized by the mine bosses, this success being achieved, in part, by the flooding of the coal fields with UMWA-recruited strikebreakers. In general, it was not a pretty picture. It got uglier in 1931–32 as Lewis effectively coddled up to and maneuvered between the Hoover administration and the fractured coal operatives. The machinations of bureaucratic business unionism helped secure the threatened industry liberation from anti-trust, price-fixing legislation. Collective bargaining rights for the UMWA were retained and court decisions sanctified the Lewis machine as the sole legitimate trade union agent of coal miners. This only upped the vitriolic level of anti-communism in the endless, and often quite animated, discussions and conferences where miners debated their futures. Miner militancy took heroic stands, but the NMU strikes were often compromised by organizational ineptness and a disregard of winning “material results.” With Comintern directives sanctimoniously proclaiming that the main objective of Third Period strikes was “*the revolutionization of the striking workers*,” few tangible concessions were, in fact, wrung from the mine owners. The Communist Party’s preeminent Trade Union Unity League

121 The above paragraphs draw on Joseph Angelo, “The Mine Battle: Corruption in Illinois Union,” *The Militant*, 15 October 1929; Angelo, “The Illinois Miners’ Struggle: The Conference at Belleville,” *The Militant*, 30 November 1929; Arne Swabeck, “Thieves Fall Out in the Miners Union,” *The Militant*, 7 December 1929; “Illinois Miners Out on Strike,” *The Militant*, 14 December 1929; Swabeck, “Illinois Miners on the March! Cossacks Used, but the Miners Don’t Scab,” *The Militant*, 21 December 1929; Swabeck, “Miners of Illinois Fought Big Odds,” *The Militant*, 28 December 1929; Gerry Allard, “On the Illinois Miners,” *The Militant*, 15 February 1931; Cannon, “The Return of Gerry Allard,” *The Militant*, 5 September 1931; Cannon to Dunne, 16 December 1930 and 5 January 1931, in Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon, Writings and Speeches, 1928–1931*, 290.

leader, William Z. Foster, for all of his untiring efforts in the miners' battles, left the coal fields in 1931 a "badly shaken" man. Admitting defeat, he never again took a direct personal role in leading a strike.¹²²

In Illinois, the demise of the NMU saw the UMWA increasingly challenged by a Fishwick-led Reorganized UMW [RUMW] in 1930–31. This "union" within the larger miners' union drew into it progressives like John Brophy and Cannon's old contact in the industry, Alexander Howat. The RUMW was an expression of District 12's dissenting tradition, but it was also an uneasy alliance of career bureaucrats with a healthy appetite for class collaboration, Musteite moderates, and progressive reformers.¹²³

Cannon, Angelo, and the CLA, navigating a difficult political channel through Communist Party sectarianism, competing contingents of labor fakirs, and the actions of progressive but non-communist reformers, took dead aim at obvious officialdoms and generally tilted in the direction of the likes of Howat, whom they presented as a representation of miner militancy. Within the RUMW, which the CLA at first supported critically, Howat symbolized for Cannon and his comrades the somewhat confused possibilities of an emerging Left-wing. It built on the strengths of rank-and-file miners and rode the wave of opposition to the trade union tops, be they associated with the arch-conservative forces of Lewis's national UMWA or the likes of the Illinois district's advocates of "reorganization," Fishwick and 'Weeping Jack' Walker.

Trotsky early pressured Cannon and others to hit harder at Howat, Brophy, and other "gentlemen who call themselves by the absolutely inconsistent name of progressives," a species he thought signified at best nothing more than an Americanized variant of "trade-unionist centrism." Even non-League member Gerry Allard thought the CLA "too soft" on Howat. He claimed in February 1931 that Howat's "weakening" betrayed "opportunistic motives" which ill-suited him to be "a national leader of the coal miners." Cannon's response to Allard

122 See Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism*, 258–261; Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism*, 173–175; Linda Nyden, "Black Miners in Western Pennsylvania, 1925–1931," *Science and Society*, 41 (Spring 1977), 69–101; Carl I. Meyerhuber, *Less Than Forever: The Rise and Decline of Union Solidarity in Western Pennsylvania* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1987), 113–131; Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Quadrangle, 1977), 174–178; John Brophy, *A Miner's Life* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), 235–236.

123 Dallas M. Young, "Origins of the Progressive Mine Workers of America," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 40 (September 1947), 313–330; Lorin Lee Cary, "The Reorganized United Mine Workers of America, 1930–1931," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 66 (Autumn 1973), 246–248.

made it abundantly clear that he had come to see Howat and his ilk as “pseudoradicals” whose role it was to lead the miners astray, pushing them toward Fishwick, Farrington, and Walker. Yet recurring National Executive Committee discussions within the leading inner circles of the League often revealed that the CLA seemed constantly on guard against pandering to the likes of Howat, Muste, and other progressive reform elements inside the dissident miners’ movement. Such debates underscored that however important American Trotskyists were in the miners’ revolt, their forces were not strong. Trotsky’s insistence that the Left Opposition would be unable “to isolate, to condemn to impotence the Lewis and Fishwick machines unless we crush implacably their whips, Howat, Brophy, and Company,” articulated a strategy that was incompletely assimilated by Cannon and the CLA in the 1930–32 developments in Illinois’s District 12. The result was that when a new and, for the CLA exceedingly hopeful, oppositional miners’ union coalesced out of the intensifying civil war in the Illinois coal fields in 1932, it would continue to embody contradictory currents and possibilities. There was, to be sure, a genuine opening for the Left-wing, and for Trotskyist ideas to be conveyed to the rank-and-file miners by the likes of Angelo, Allard, and other Left Oppositionists, even to the point of a figure like Allard taking on a leadership role. Yet the strengths of wavering elements in this new miners’ mobilization were both diverse (representing bureaucratic and anti-communist elements as well as progressive and centrist forces such as those around A.J. Muste) as well as strong. In conjunction with the weakness of the Left Opposition, as a body they limited how far the new Progressive Miners of America could be pushed to the left. The result was that Cannon’s 1932–33 optimism about what the Left Opposition could achieve in the Illinois coal fields was perhaps exaggerated.¹²⁴

124 Among the many documents pertaining to this history of dissident miner unionism in Illinois, the following articles in *The Militant* are illustrative: “The Mining Situation and the Tasks of the Left Wing,” 1 March 1930; “Miners! Build Left Wing at Springfield,” 8 March 1930; “The Springfield and Indianapolis Miners Conventions,” 22 March 1930; Arne Swabeck, “The situation Among the Coal Miners,” 12 April 1930; John J. Watt, “Former N.M.U. Head for Left Group,” 12 July 1930; Joseph Angelo, “Illinois Miners,” 15 November 1930; Gerry Allard, “On the Illinois Miners,” 15 February 1931; Cannon, “How the Miners Were Defeated,” 1 March 1931; Cannon, “Miners Form New Union,” 10 September 1932. Trotsky’s criticisms appear in “Progressives in the United Mine Workers,” in *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement 1, 1929–1933*, 30–31. Evidence of Cannon’s and the CLA’s acceptance of Trotsky’s position includes three lengthy statements in *The Militant*, 1 April 1931: Joseph Angelo, “Illinois Miners in Revolt: What Has Happened in Illinois”; “Illinois Miners in Revolt: Rank and File Rebel Against Fishwick-Lewis Agreement; New Union Call Issued”; and Cannon, “The Communists and the Progressives.” See also Cannon’s Speech Notes

The call to form a new miners' union in Illinois was based on an understanding that the District 12 coal fields were so fraught with crises that no other reasonable option existed for the beleaguered workers in the industry. It had nothing to do with Third Period attachment to "Red" unionism under Communist leadership. With the operatives driving the miners deeper and deeper into destitution, cutting wages, utilizing technological innovation to displace the workforce, placing the mines on short-time or closing down production altogether, and often smashing whatever vestiges of unionism they could, the situation was dire indeed. It was further exacerbated by the Lewis-led UMWA's open class collaboration, reinforced by violent business unionist gangster methods of intimidation and coercion or direct reliance on the courts and local police to stifle miner oppositionists. The final straw for the Illinois miners was Lewis's heavy-handedness in enforcing an April 1932 wage contract that called for a \$5-a-day scale, constituting a reduction in the miner's daily pay of roughly 18 percent.¹²⁵

As rebellious miners wildcatted in defiance of the UMWA bureaucracy, petitions of protest circulated, and mass meetings of thousands of miners and their family members convened in the north-central coal-producing districts around Springfield and Bendl, Illinois, where Allard and long-time militant Joe Colbert, played leading roles. The former, along with his wife Irene, was at first arrested, but even this was not enough. Colbert was finally gunned down in the early morning hours as he harvested mushrooms in a pasture beside his Bendl home. The murderers, reputed to be in the pay of the coal operatives, sped away in an automobile, leaving the dissident miner for dead; 15,000 marched in his funeral procession.

for a New York Open Forum, 7 March 1931, "Communists and Progressives," Reel 32, JPC Papers; Max Shachtman, "The Illinois Miners' Convention," *The Militant*, 15 April 1931; Hugo Oehler, "Miners' Revolt Checked at Muste Convention," and Gerry Allard, "Musteism and Stalinism at the Miners Convention," *The Militant*, 1 May 1931; Arne Swabeck, "Results of the Illinois Miners' Revolt," *The Militant*, 15 May 1931. Discussion of the miners' revolt also appears in National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 23 March 1931; 13 April 1931; 27 April 1931, Box 35, Folder 5, GB Papers; and in National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 8 September 1932; 15 September 1932; 29 September 1932; 6 October 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers. See, as well, *Dog Days*, 64–66.

125 Conventional if somewhat subdued accounts of the District 12 miner insurgency can be found in Dubofsky and Van Tine, *John L. Lewis*, 165–177; Bernstein, *The Lean Years*, 358–366; Harriet D. Hudson, *The Progressive Mine Workers of America: A Study in Rival Unionism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Bureau of Economic and Business Research Bulletin 73, 1952).

"Germinal" (Gerry Allard) wrote to *The Militant*, praising the courageous leadership of Colbert's widow, Frankie, who supposedly single-handedly organized a walkout protest of 1,100 miners and helped launch an army of 30,000 angry coal diggers, many of them unemployed. Along with their families, these militants threatened picket closures of all Illinois mines where coal was still being dug. The oppositionists and the left-wing, which included the CLA, IWW, the Socialist Party, the Socialist Labor Party, the Musteite CPLA, and some rank-and-file CPers (officially the Communist Party kept its distance from the emerging miner movement), were strongest in the northern-most areas of the central Illinois coal fields. They were weakest in the south, known as "Little Egypt," where the powerful Peabody Coal Company-United Mine Workers of America alliance presented staunch resistance to the anti-bureaucratic and militant message of the dissident miners. Pleading for support for the strike movement, which remained very much alive throughout the summer of 1932, "Germinal" presented the struggle as organized against both the bosses and the bureaucrats.

The dual nature of battle was captured well in women's auxiliary verse:

John L. Lewis and Peabody Coal
are working hand in hand
Stirring up dissension 'mongst
The miners of the land.
But we will not listen to
Their dictates and commands
For we are marching to victory.

For the religious-minded among the mining community, loyalty to the bureaucratized UMWA was presented in the form of a Lord's Prayer:

John L. Lewis and John H. Walker are our masters, we shall always want.
They maketh us to struggle in the darkness of coalfields.
They leadth us in the paths of disaster for their name's sake.
Yea though we walk through the valley of starvation, we shall always
fear
the cold, for thou art against us; thy deputies and thy gang they torture
us.

Thou preparest a vast check-off from our pay in the presence of thy
cheaters, thou anointeth our heads with worry; our heads runneth over.

Surely disaster and terror shall follow us all the days of our life; and we shall dwell in the house divided against itself forever.

The demands against the companies included the six-hour day and the five-day week; no reduction in pay; equalization of work; no discrimination on the basis of age; unemployment insurance; an end to the victimization of militants; and bargaining with rank-and-file leaders rather than UMWA officials who, it was declared, are “no longer our representatives.” These repudiated union figureheads were indicted on the grounds of refusing to comply with the stated majority decisions of the membership; discriminating against foreign-born miners; using hired thugs and police against union members; openly allying themselves with the coal operatives; and violating their oath of obligation to the UMWA.

In an effort to extend the strike against the Lewis-enforced contract into the fall of 1932, the insurgent miners organized a two-pronged assault on the bastions of the Peabody Coal Company, which had a pocket of working mines near Taylorville, Christian County, in the south-central part of the state, as well as being powerfully entrenched in the southern coal fields. Over the course of the summer of 1932, militants organized an influx of dissident miners into Taylorville, effectively shutting down the Peabody Coal Company mines in that area. “Little Egypt” would prove a more bloody battle ground. The rebel miners organized a massive caravan. An eighty-mile long convoy of cars and trucks carrying protesting miners, their immediate families and extended kin, and left-wing supporters departed Staunton and made its way south towards the Franklin County mines, where the Lewis-led UMWA forces retained strength, and many Peabody mines were working. State police forces prodded the miners and their procession of vehicles onwards into the night, ostensibly against the wishes and better judgement of the protesters. The caravan was ambushed near Mulkeytown, Illinois, just a few miles from the Jackson and Franklin counties border. A large vigilante party composed of local businessmen, high school youths, and coal miner supporters of the Lewis UMWA, rumored to have been deputized by the Franklin County Sheriff, opened fire on five hundred vehicles after they crossed into the hostile county unawares on the evening of 24 August 1932. In the ensuing fusillade from pistols, shotguns, rifles, and machine guns, followed by beatings and the torching of cars as well as food and first-aid supplies, 150 unarmed men, women, and children were wounded, and two miners killed. Amidst declarations of martial law and bans by Lewis’s UMWA on miners’ meetings, reports from the 11 sub-districts of the Illinois coal fields nevertheless indicated that mines at or near Springfield, Taylorville, Staunton, and Belleville were 100 percent struck. Hold-outs in Franklin County

that the convoy was on its way to influence were “losing ground,” with only 7 of 19 mines still working.¹²⁶

This District 12 insurgency led to the formation of the Progressive Miners of America at a Gillespie, Illinois meeting of 2 September 1932. One month later, the founding convention of the new union also convened in Gillespie and saw the establishment of the Illinois Women’s Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners of America. From its inception, the PMA was handcuffed by the timidity and anti-communism of a layer of conventional leaders. At the founding convention, for instance, things got off on the wrong foot as the PMA conceded the Lewis-Walker \$5.00 wage scale, and its President, Claude Percy, clasped the hand of the coal operatives, declaring they would prove “good friends ... and help build the new union.” Joe Angelo described the proceedings as “a rank and file gathering with a Noah’s ark of political tendencies.” As the Communists refused Left Opposition pleas to build left-wing unity at the Gillespie Progressive Miners convention, Cannon and the CLA acknowledged that their forces were “feeble.” They had been unable to turn back the right-wing leadership’s rallying cry of, “We must not soil our hands with the Reds.”¹²⁷

Violence quickly escalated against the PMA. Miner militants responded with resolve, however, and came to put considerable trust in the left-wing. Allard in particular, as well as scattered rank-and-file dissidents who looked to the League and read its press, such as Alex Fraser, gained stature in the coal districts. When a Progressive Miner activist, Andrew Ganis, was shot to death by a National Guardsman in late October 1932, supposedly after having been fingered by a strikebreaker, Allard was called upon to deliver his eulogy. The funeral procession consisted of 5000 vehicles, each carrying four passengers, and Allard’s speech to an assembled throng of 15,000 miners and additional

126 The above paragraphs rely on an array of sources. On the coal wars see Bernstein, *The Lean Years*, 375–377; “Illinois Miners Revolt Spreads Thru State: Thousands of Miners On Strike Against Lewis Machine and Wage Cuts,” *The Militant*, 20 August 1932; Germinal, “Diggers Reply to Terror with Increased Militancy: Defy Bosses, Fakers, and Police in Tremendous Advance,” *The Militant*, 27 August 1932; “Massacre Striking Miners in Franklin County Illinois,” *The Militant*, 3 September 1932; Allard, “Joe Colbert – Labor’s Martyr,” *The Militant*, 3 September 1932; “Miners Form New Union: Raise Struggle to New Heights – National Unity Aim of Militant Illinois Body,” *The Militant*, 10 September 1932. The doggerel is quoted from Stephane E. Booth, “Ladies in White: Female Activism in the Southern Illinois Coalfields, 1932–1938,” in John H.M. Laslett, ed., *The United Mine Workers of America: A Model of Industrial Solidarity?* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 375–376.

127 “Miners Form New Union: Raise Struggle to New Heights,” *The Militant*, 10 September 1932; “Right Wing Wins at Gillespie Mine Workers Conference,” and Joe Angelo, “Some Lessons of the Gillespie Conference,” *The Militant*, 15 October 1932.

supporters called on the embattled workers to hold firm to their militant convictions and the time would soon come to avenge their dead. Jack Carmody wrote to *The Militant* that authorities would not allow services to be held in Christian County, where the murdered miner lived and worked. "Mass picketing on an unheard-of scale," was mobilized in the district to keep the mines closed, with thousands of miners, as well as their wives and children, taking up picket duty every morning at 5 A.M. Hundreds were being arrested daily, and transported by military guard to the county line. Carmody was especially impressed with the "unconquerable spirit" of the women of the coal fields who were taking a decided stand against the misery and privations they long endured under the corrupt and degenerate UMWA. "The women in the strike are displaying marvelous courage and militancy," he wrote, "In many strike centers they have established community kitchens and are learning how to run them on the cooperative principle which will be a feature of our new society." Seven months later, with class war still raging in the Illinois mining districts, *The Militant* reported that the "heroic Women's Auxiliary" played a critical role in supporting pickets threatened with dispersal by National Guardsmen.¹²⁸

As studies by Stephanie E. Booth and Caroline Waldron Merithew have established, women played a pivotal role in galvanizing the Illinois miners' struggles, and their auxiliary insured that, in Merithew's words, "the PMA was one of the few movements in which non-wage-earning women became leaders in organizing an industry that employed only male labor." John L. Lewis harangued miner critics in the PMA for "hiding behind the skirts of women." The Auxiliary helped to build dual union locals, rallied men to biracial unionism, and organized protest marches on the Illinois state capital of Springfield, 10,000-strong. Dissidents presented demands to the Governor for "increased and more equitable distribution of State aid" and immediate "restoration of civil liberties in the coal fields." Like their husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons, the PMA women faced the violence of the state and the brutality of company/UMWA thugs. Many were jailed, injured, forcibly detained against their wills, and threatened. They challenged decisively the gender norms of their times as well as the armed might of opponents desperate to defeat the mining insurgency. Their call to restore "civil liberties" was made in the face of what they aptly dubbed "a reign of terror." The death toll, on all sides of the District 12

128 Jack Carmody, "The Murder of Andrew Ganis," *The Militant*, 5 November 1932; "Class War Rages in Mine Area of Illinois," *The Militant*, 17 June 1933; "Illinois Miners in Mass Action: Women's Auxiliary Takes Valiant Part in Struggle," 24 June 1933.

civil war (including police, supervisory personnel, and workers), climbed to 30 individuals, and included one woman, while those seriously injured soared into the hundreds. The PMA's Women's Auxiliary named "officials of the old union, the coal corporation, county and municipal authorities, and even the State" as responsible for the orgy of "clubbing, tear-gassing, shooting, killing our people, [and] bombing our homes" that robbed citizens of the coal face of basic rights to pursue their lives without fear of physical attack.

Especially important were the efforts made to overcome decades of racial animosities. A miner's wife from Saline County wrote to the *Progressive Miner* that when she and other brothers and sisters attended a Negro funeral they were told: "this was the first time white and colored folks had ever mixed here." Black miners and their wives reported that, "they were glad to find some people who didn't discriminate and lived up to their union obligations."

The men and women of the Progressive Miners of America thus forged a fighting movement in 1932, convinced that "only heroic methods on the part of the rank-and-file [would] preserve the last basis of unionism in the bituminous field." Central to this accomplishment were the movement's women's auxiliaries which, by mid-1933, were said to have numbered 75 with a membership of 15,000.¹²⁹

Cannon and the Communist League of America (Opposition) hailed the formation of the PMA as a necessary step forward in the class struggle. The militancy of the miners and the women's auxiliary was applauded, but it was also pointed out that the new union would be tested decisively in the months to come: by the coal companies, by the state, by the established UMWA bureaucracy, and by the PMA's right-wing leadership. Cannon would later champion the Progressive Miners' Women's Auxiliary and its "heroic struggles during 1932-33." He also took the opportunity to stress a more general, and not always

129 Among the best recent discussions of the PMA are writings on the women's auxiliary, on which the above paragraphs draw: Caroline Waldron Merithew, "We Were Not Ladies: Gender, Class, and a Women's Auxiliary's Battle for Mining Unionism," *Journal of Women's History*, 18 (Summer 2006), 63-94, esp. 66, 79-80, 84; Booth, "Ladies in White," 371-393; and for an account of the major figure in the founding of the Women's Auxiliary, Agnes Burns Weick and David Thoreau Weick, *Woman from Spillertown: A Memoir of Agnes Burns Weick* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992). The miner's wife writing on race is quoted in "Illinois Miners in Mass Action: Women's Auxiliary Takes Valiant Part in Struggle," *The Militant*, 24 June 1933. See also, Mary Heaton Vorse, "Women's March," in Dee Garrison, ed., *Rebel Pen: The Writings of Mary Heaton Vorse* (New York: Monthly Review, 1985), 153-156; A Miner, "Miner's Women on the March," *The Militant*, 11 February 1933; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 61-66; "On with the Fight! Say Auxiliary Leaders," *The Progressive Miner*, 21 April 1933.

recognized, point. Class struggle, Cannon insisted, was not solely a male prerogative. If it was to succeed, working-class men and women needed to be brought together:

We see the issue between capital and labor as an unceasing struggle between the class of exploited workers and the class of exploiting parasites. It is a war. What decides in this war, as in all others, is power. ... The greatest example of effective organization of women – one that did much to inspire us – belongs to the Progressive Miners of Illinois. ... [It] needed extraordinary resources to survive. One of these resources, which played a decisive part in keeping the union alive and beating back its enemies, was the Women's Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners. The great importance of organizing the women, even where they are not directly employed in industry, was brought out very clearly in this experience.

"The Women's Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners set the pace for the whole labor movement," Cannon concluded, "and by right holds first place as the real pioneer."¹³⁰

As for the Communist Party, it squandered yet another opportunity to build an effective united front of workers willing to advance labor's cause. The Stalinist leadership, the National Executive Committee of the CLA declared unequivocally, "rejected the policy of a genuine united front of approaching the existing independent miners' unions as bona fide bodies and of recognizing the Illinois miners' revolts as a genuine mass movement, even though infested in the past with misleaders. It refused to recognize any other union other than the one over which it exercised mechanical control, the National Miners' Union. It failed ... entirely in the essential task of developing and organizing the left wing within the U.M.W. It boycotted and attacked revolt movements which were not ready to accept its mechanical domination and its wrong course. As a result of this the Party is itself isolated from the Illinois mine fields." The CLA thus called on all communists to "penetrate deeper into ... unions" like the PMA. "Away with the policy of self-isolation and with all the rubbish of the 'Third Period'.

¹³⁰ James P. Cannon, "The Secret of Local 574," in *The Organizer: Daily Strike Bulletin* (Minneapolis), 18 August 1934, reprinted in Cannon, *Notebook of an Agitator*, 91–92, a book dedicated to "Rose Karsner, who was there all the time." Cannon also acknowledged the militant role of the PMA's Women's Auxiliary in Cannon, "Red Baiting in Illinois: The P.M.A. Under Fire," *The Militant*, 29 April 1933.

In its place must be posed the question of genuine united front policy and of trade union unity.”¹³¹

This orientation was not without its pitfalls. A contradictory two-sidedness bedeviled Cannon and the nascent American Trotskyist movement in its dealings with the Illinois miners, evident well before the formation of the Progressive Miners of America. Swabeck’s report to the National Committee on the mine fields in April 1931 stressed that within the CLA’s Illinois endeavors, the tasks were to constantly raise “the distinction between themselves and the ‘progressives,’” establishing “the right of communists to function within the movement.” In warning against the tendency to exaggerate the possibilities and values of “rank and file leadership,” Swabeck suggested instead that the task for the Left Opposition comrades was to press for “Left wing leadership,” and to “advocate unity with all Left wing and genuine progressive forces.” As much as Cannon and the League advocated the right of communist independence within the miners’ insurgency, then, they also turned invariably to the chimera of “Left-wing unity,” relying, in the absence of Left Opposition trade union fractions, on the support of Musteites, Communist Party members, the Socialist Party, and other such networks of radicals. The consequence, perhaps, was that less attention was directed toward developing Trotskyism’s independent presence in the coal fields than could and should have been forthcoming, even acknowledging the limited human resources at the CLA’s disposal.¹³²

As the PMA was crystallizing, for instance, the CLA placed great hope in former National Miners Union head, John J. Watt, proposing that he run for Secretary of the dissident movement. Watt, a victim of Communist Party bureaucracy, was briefly a supporter of the Left Opposition. He soon proved a disappointment, however, and seemed incapable of shedding his visceral antagonism to the Communist Party, which conditioned within Watt a tendency to respond to Stalinist sectarianism with anti-communist denunciation. This inevitably moved Watt in a rightward political trajectory and, in conjunction with his penchant to “freelance” and his instinctual resistance to the discipline of a Leninist organization, he exhibited a marked lack of political consistency. As he gravitated away from the Left Opposition he corresponded with Albert Weisbord’s journal, *Class Struggle*, and eventually found himself repudiating Trotskyism and embracing the more palatable and reformist project of the already discredited Illinois Socialist Party opponents of Lewis and the

131 “Communist League Greet New Progressive Miners Union,” and “Allard Answers Party Bureaucrats,” *The Militant*, 10 September 1932.

132 National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 13 April 1931, Box 35, Folder 5, GB Papers; *Dog Days*, 64–66.

UMWA hierarchy. Watt would, as a consequence, suffer in terms of the regard with which he was held by miner militants, and the trust invested in him plummeted.¹³³

Problems also arose with Gerry Allard, the PMA leader on whom Cannon placed much hope for a Left Opposition breakthrough into mass work among the insurgent miners. Allard, the on-again-off-again Left Oppositionist, had been playing a critical role in Illinois's District 12 for some time, especially since the spring of 1931, when calls for a new union raised forcefully the possibilities of a mobilization of dissident miners. Cannon resisted Glotzer's push in May 1931 to pressure Allard "as to what he considers his relation to the Left Opposition to be, and that he define his intentions in regards to becoming a member," preferring to wait until the miner militant decided himself to reapply for membership, which he did a few months later. The announcement of the formation of the Progressive Miners of America in *The Militant* featured Allard, accenting his role as Secretary of the Policy Committee of the Gillespie convention that brought the new union into being. Allard, elected to the PMA's Executive Board and selected to be part of a committee charged with insisting that the state address the violation of miners' civil liberties in the aftermath of the ambushing of the Franklin County convoy, was also chosen to edit the movement's newspaper, the *Progressive Miner*. His wife Irene played an important role in the formation of the influential, activist and militant Women's Auxiliary. Ostensibly recognized in the Illinois coal fields as the public face of the Left Opposition, Allard, for all of his contribution to the miners' militancy, to the radicalism of the PMA, and to the League's credibility among dissident coal diggers, was nonetheless also always something of a liability.¹³⁴

133 On Watt see Stanton, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1928–1931*, 221, 242; John J. Watt, "Former N.M.U. Head for Left Group," *The Militant*, 12 July 1930; Max Shachtman, "Illinois Miners' Convention," *The Militant*, 15 April 1931; National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 13 April 1931, Box 35, File 5, GB Papers; John J. Watt, "The Situation in the Illinois Coal Fields," *Class Struggle*, 1 December 1931. For decisive Left Opposition criticisms of Watt and the Socialist Party see Joe Angelo, "Unity is Urgent Need of Illinois Miners," and Angelo, "An Open Letter to John Watt: Standpoint of the Left Opposition in Current Miners' Struggles," *The Militant*, 17 September 1932; Oehler to Cannon, 29 May 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

134 Max Shachtman, "Illinois Miners Convention," *The Militant*, 15 April 1931; Hugo Oehler, "Miners Revolt Checked at Muste Convention," *The Militant*, 1 May 1931; Arne Swabeck, "Results of the Illinois Miners Revolt," *The Militant*, 15 May 1931; Gerry Allard, "Illinois Miners on the March," 4 July 1931; Cannon, "The Return of Gerry Allard," 5 September 1931; National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 11 May 1931, Box 35, Folder 5, GB Papers; Merithew, "We Were Not Ladies," 74–78; Germinal, "Miner's Form New Union," and Gerry Allard, "Allard Answers Party Bureaucrats," *The Militant*, 10 September 1932. Allard's

The ink was barely dry on the 12 September 1932 issue of *The Militant* carrying "Germinal's" coverage of the founding of the PMA and an article signed by Allard assailing the Communist Party's misrepresentation of him, when Arne Swabeck offered a corrective. Allard, Swabeck noted, was a "militant on the firing line and in the leadership of a mass movement fighting for the correct policies," but he had come to faulty conclusions in his understandable pique at the Stalinist bureaucrats who subjected him to pusillanimous rebuke. Despite the blunders of the Communist Party leaders, Swabeck suggested that Allard too easily slipped into error by understating the necessity of the Party's leadership in the class struggle, thereby contributing to the anti-communism that was unfortunately all too common among miners. Moreover, Allard, who issued an invitation to the rank-and-file members of the National Miners Union to join the PMA fell into the same mistake as the Communist Party leaders, whose notion of the united front was that it could only be built in opposition to all other left organizations, the so-called united front "from below." Swabeck insisted that in spite of its leadership, the NMU was "a bona fide workers' organization ... a Left wing union." As such, it had to be approached formally to join a united front through an official approach to its elected leadership, with the ranks simultaneously urged to press for the acceptance of such an invitation.¹³⁵

Allard never reacted well to such criticism and, indeed, from the inception of the PMA he always understood his loyalties as divided between the miners' movement and the Left Opposition. The latter always seemed relegated to a subordinate status. Such a dualism was exacerbated by the tendency of some Left Oppositionists to misunderstand the nature of the miners' struggle and to regard strike movements and dissident mobilizations in the Illinois coal fields as imbued with "revolutionary consciousness" because of the willingness of the workers in the fight to "go down to Franklin Country with arms in hand." Cannon's conscripts to the coal fields, George Clarke and former Irish Republican Army captain, Jack Carmody, argued out such positions of difference in September 1932. Clarke wrote to Cannon that Carmody, with Joe Angelo giving him "half support," dismissed as "intellectual tripe" any discussion that pointed out that the PMA lacked a revolutionary leadership, too often aligned itself with the Democratic Party, and pandered to ignorance and anti-communism. Cannon was at his old, caretaker best in understanding what could be achieved within the constrained human possibilities of the moment. Left Opposition

importance is also discussed directly in National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 18 August 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers.

135 Swabeck, "A Reply to Comrade Allard," *The Militant*, 17 September 1932. See also Joe Angelo, "Unity is Urgent Need of Illinois Miners," in the same issue.

correspondence and National Committee minutes reveal his patient, pedagogical efforts to balance the personal and the political in the League's attempts to develop a presence in the Progressive Miners. On the one hand was the upside of older comrades and their experience in the class struggle as well as their integration into networks of union activists, with both the positive and negative consequences of these histories. On the other hand was the downside, recognized by young League intellectuals like Clarke and Glotzer, of exaggerated understandings of militancy and accommodation to broad, left-wing sensibilities, both of which could well understate the orientation and principles of the Communist League of America.

Writing to Clarke, Cannon laid out the necessity of building the Left Opposition: "We want to do this job systematically. No flights by night and no putsches." Establishing branches of the League was the task of the hour, but it would require protracted work in District 12. Because of this, Cannon cautioned Clarke to "go at the thing more patiently and make sure that you are looking at all sides of the problem, especially taking care to avoid sharp clashes over questions which are really not fundamental and, even in that case, you must remember that there is the possibility of correcting serious errors by presenting disputes to the NC." Finally, Cannon stressed that there was an important personal, psychological dimension to building the Left Opposition, and that Clarke had to "try to look at things" from the vantage point of his coworkers in the field, Carmody and Angelo. Cannon stressed that Clarke consider their "point of view or at least [try] to understand it." He pointed out that, "They are both older and more experienced. Jack has been through some fights. Angelo is an old-time militant in the miners' union, and besides that, is a well-educated communist. You should not be surprised if they do not put a proper estimation on your opinions at first. If you ... are reasonable and tactful ... I think you will soon get over present difficulties."¹³⁶

Allard, however, was never decisively won to the politics of the Left Opposition and indeed enjoyed his stature as a PMA leader overly much. He clearly thought his prominence in the miner insurgency situated him beyond CLA influence. As the PMA assumed a place of central importance in the Illinois

¹³⁶ The above paragraphs draw on Clarke to Cannon, 20 September 1932; Cannon to Clarke, 23 September 1932, Reel 3, JPC Papers. On Clarke and Carmody going to the Illinois mine fields see National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 25 August 1932; 1 September 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers; Glotzer to Shachtman, 16 October 1932, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers. For Clarke's, Carmody's, and Angelo's articles in *The Militant* in this period see Carmody, "Lewis Gangsters Fail to Cow Miners," Clarke, "Which Political Party Shall the Miners Support in the Coming Elections," and Angelo, "One Road For Miners!" *The Militant*, 1 October 1932.

coal mining struggles in September 1932, Cannon successfully moved a motion inside the National Executive Committee of the CLA that Allard “should come forward openly as a Left Oppositionist and be so referred to in our press.” Allard, whose personal antipathy to the Communist Party was pronounced, was apparently dragging his feet within the PMA in terms of the movement’s orientation to the approaching presidential election. The League’s policy was to support CP candidates, but Clarke was having difficulty convincing Allard and others to make a public stand for such a political course. Shachtman, in particular, wanted the NC to make “categoric demand upon our comrades at Gillespie that our miner comrades, and especially Allard, raise the question of the attitude of the PMA to the coming elections.” By the end of the year, it was apparent that Allard’s editorship of the *Progressive Miner* was not panning out. A movement to establish a new Progressive Federation of Labor that could counter the AFL was being promoted by the PMA. Apparently Allard at first supported this initiative, doing so without seeking the counsel of his CLA comrades.

Cannon and the Left Opposition thought this a dangerous move. Writing to Joe Angelo, Cannon lowered the political boom:

I cannot think of any better way for the *Progressive Miner* to break its neck as a trade union than to try to take in the whole country before it has solid ground under its feet, before the conditions have been created [for] any serious basis to formulate a new trade union center. I am a little bit surprised that you have not reacted on this matter and demanded the intervention of the NC to help Comrade Allard to avoid some of these errors which are so compromising to the Left Opposition. I think the National Committee will approve my plan to go to Gillespie even though the raising of the bus fare under the present circumstances will necessitate a miracle. I will expect to meet you there a day or two before and to have your complete and active support in the effort to steer the course of Comrade Allard and all the left wing elements along a different path.

The National Executive Committee was also “sharply critical” of the *Progressive Miner*’s increasingly cozy relationship with the Musteite Brookwood Labor College and the Socialist Party’s Norman Thomas. The pages of the Allard-edited publication provided evidence, in the view of Cannon, Shachtman, and others, of reformist proclivities. The CLA suggested that if Allard could not control the editorial direction of the paper with respect to this new appetite for “progressivism,” he should develop “a signed department of his own in the paper” through which “the communist point of view and criticism” could be presented. “If this is impossible,” the CLA’s NC concluded, Allard’s “position as editor becomes

untenable for a member of the League." It was also proposed that either Glotzer or John Edwards be dispatched from Chicago to Gillespie in order to set Allard straight.¹³⁷

Oehler's reports from the coal fields a few months later repeatedly noted that Allard was difficult to pin down, even for private face-to-face meetings. "I arrived in [Gillespie] for the second time to find Gerry busy as hell and leaving town for Franklin County," Oehler wrote Angelo. He further complained to Cannon that although Allard was apprised of his coming to the coal fields well in advance, the PMA leader and CLA member had made no preparations for the visit. "The day I arrived in Gillespie," Oehler wrote on another occasion to Cannon, "Gerry was out of town, so I wasted a day. That evening he came in town and I found he has to leave the next morning for days, in fact until the end of the week, so I only had a chance to talk over a few of the main points. To stay in Gillespie until he got back meant to loaf for several days." Even after almost a month in Illinois, Oehler conceded that he had only been able to meet with Allard four times, "but each time only for a short period ... we never yet got down to business." Allard was unable to give his Left Opposition comrade much in the way of information on the nature of contract discussions then underway in the Illinois mining milieu. The PMA leader confessed he had few contacts that could be recruited to the Left Opposition, and he seemed decidedly cavalier when it came to matters of vital concern in creating a presence for the Communist League of America (Opposition) in Illinois, especially the formation of Educational Clubs that Cannon and Oehler had earlier proposed.

Indeed, Allard informed Oehler that the PMA had just appointed Tom Tippet, a long-time ally of A.J. Muste, as the miners' union's educational director.

137 The above paragraphs draw on National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 8 September 1932; 29 September 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers; 12 January 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers; Cannon to Glotzer, 14 January 1933; Cannon to Glotzer and Edwards, 19 January 1933; Cannon to Angelo, 19 January 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Cannon, "A New Federation of Labor?" *The Militant*, 21 January 1933. The Brookwood Labor College, base of the CPLA's A.J. Muste throughout the late 1920s, nurtured left-wing opponents of the AFL trade union bureaucracy at the same time that it kept a discrete distance from the Communist Party. It would have appealed to Allard, as it did in the late 1920s, to former Communist Party members and CLA militants aligned with Shachtman and Glotzer who would later work closely with Cannon, Morris Lewit and Sylvia Bleeker. On Brookwood see Paul Le Blanc, "Brookwood Labor College," in Le Blanc, *Left Americana: The Radical Heart of US Politics* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016), 59–71. There were differences between the Brookwood Labor College of the late 1920s and the same institution in the early 1930s. These were not unrelated to Muste's shifting politics as he gravitated to the revolutionary left in the early-to-mid 1930s, while Brookwood retained its progressive character, even intensifying its distrust of the Communist Party.

Tippett was available because he had just left the Brookwood Labor College over disputes around specific policies. Allard even boasted to Oehler that he was “instrumental in getting Tippett in.” Oehler understood immediately what had been lost, writing in disappointment to Cannon that, “this leaves us out of the picture in the building of ... [educational] clubs from town to town. I think that the only thing we can do is to see that one of our instructors is put in the staff.” Even this small concession would not come to pass. Allard insisted that the educational director reported to the PMA and had nothing to do with the Brookwood Labor College, but Oehler was not so easily taken in, writing to Cannon that, “Of course Tippett will use [his position] for the Muste forces.” Oehler would later condemn Tippett’s educational classes as “sowing confusion” and “strengthening the Right wing element or its ‘Left’ cover within the Progressive Miners Union.”

There was more of the same. Apparently a movement was afoot to start a “forum where all sections of the labor movement would speak.” Amazingly, Oehler thought Allard was “the driving force” behind this initiative, but confessed to Cannon that whether or not this was true was not yet clear to him. Allard was not about to come clean on how the forum idea came to be taken up within the PMA or how it was to be implemented. He simply told Oehler that such lectures “may be spread over the mine field.” Oehler groaned to Cannon that, “The only way we can fit into the free for all is through a series of ... lectures on timely topics. To help organize such would mean to organize a structure for the different brands of reformism that go up and down Illinois like locusts. I spoke to Gerry about this and gave him my opinion, but he said it’s as good as done already.”¹³⁸

As Allard championed the PMA and the oppositional union confronted staunch, often violent, resistance, his stature in the militant miners’ movement only increased, but his work for the Left Opposition lagged, to put it charitably. With Cannon and the CLA National Executive Committee raising criticisms of Allard, the PMA leader danced circles around his League comrades. At the time when Cannon and others first raised questions of Allard, the PMA was embroiled in a deadly strike at Kincaid, near Taylorville, where it faced off

¹³⁸ The above paragraphs draw on Cannon to Allard, 11 February 1933; Oehler to Cannon, 7 March 1933; Oehler to Cannon, no date [8 March 1933?]; Oehler to Angelo, 23 March 1933; Oehler to Cannon, 4 April 1933 [misdated 4 March 1933], Reel 3, JPC Papers. On Tippett and Muste see as well Elizabeth Kirkpatrick Dilling, *The Red Network: A ‘Who’s Who’ and Handbook of Radicalism for Patriots* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 130; Nat Hentoff, *Peace Agitator: The Story of A.J. Muste* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 56–90; Dubofsky and Van Tine, *John L. Lewis*, 163, 167; Oehler, “Prospects of Development of the Progressive Miners,” *The Militant*, 13 May 1933.

against gun-toting scabs brought to Illinois from West Virginia and elsewhere and Peabody Coal Company guards. When the Peabody guards attempted to disperse PMA pickets set up along the sidewalks of Kincaid, a violent altercation ensued, in which gunfire was exchanged: two strike-breakers and Emma Cumerlatto, a Women's Auxiliary member, were killed. Fifty-four PMA members, many of them foreign-born or descendants of first-generation immigrants, faced charges of murder, unlawful assembly, and inciting to riot. Hugo Oehler toured the Illinois coal fields in March 1933, speaking before PMA audiences on the rise of Hitler as part of the Left Opposition's plan, in Cannon's words, to "hook the mining campaign of the League onto the present campaign we are making on Germany." Yet Allard was increasingly preoccupied with Progressive Miner affairs to the exclusion of CLA involvement.

"It seems Gerry is not very sympathetic about my arrival," Oehler informed Cannon, adding that, "He seems very suspicious and not very receptive. Thinks we are going to establish a control committee over him. He seems to have the impression that leaders are always busy in factional fights instead of fights against capitalism." Oehler attributed this non-communist understanding of leadership to Allard's conversations and friendship with Albert Glotzer. Whether this was or was not the case, the PMA leader certainly appeared, as Cannon's field operative judged, "more of a PMA man than a CLA member." Allard was even begging off the regular payment of CLA dues, claiming he was "low on funds." When a Springfield local of the Communist League of America (Opposition) was established in March 1933 it was the work of Oehler and Angelo, who now carried the lion's share of reporting on activities in the Illinois coalfields to *The Militant*.

Angelo wrote to Cannon to complain that two other victims of the Peabody Coal Company, Dewitt C. Webb, a veteran of the Bonus Army, and John Wang, whom he thought a Communist Party member, had been railroaded to jail, ostensibly for carrying concealed weapons on the picket line. "The God-damned right-wing elements within the PMA in Springfield are doing nothing about further appealing the case," Angelo fumed. Allard was apparently nowhere to be found in the poorly-built defense campaign, with Angelo stating unequivocally that, "if any action is to be taken – *We will have to do it*. Hugo and I will make some plans as soon as he is back from Minnesota." Cannon replied with what constituted, yet again, an implicit indictment of Allard's editorship of the *Progressive Miner*, and a critique of the PMA leader's savvy in labor defense matters:

I noticed with considerable apprehension the statement on policy by the Taylorville Defense Committee in a recent issue of the 'Progressive Miner'.

The half-and-half reformist elements seem to dominate the policy. That would not be so bad if there were any signs of a class struggle opposition. We must become articulate in the union and especially in the paper. It would be a good idea for the new Springfield branch of the Left Opposition to adopt a resolution of solidarity with the Taylorville prisoners and in favor of a big demonstrative protest movement of the miners and other workers before the trial, not after it. It also would have the highest value if contributions from you presenting a communist class point of view began to appear regularly in the paper. Every kind of reformist muddle-head seems to have free access to air his views there. It is high time for the communists to be heard from. As I have written you before, it will be far better if the voice of communist criticism is heard inside the union ranks and in the paper. If it can't be done there, we have to do it in *The Militant*.

Left Opposition work in the unemployed movement in the Illinois coal fields was largely the work of Angelo and Oehler as well, with Allard playing no role.

Oehler confirmed to Cannon on 30 March 1933 that Allard had neither done much to build a left-wing within the PMA or recruit union militants to the Left Opposition. After spending time in Gillespie, Oehler was optimistic about the League's prospects, but sadly Gerry was the only member in the vicinity. "The water is very muddy here," he elaborated in a letter to Angelo, "due I suppose to the fact that it is the headquarters of the PMA and ... Stalinism keeps a foothold ... through the unemployment council ... confusion reigns and so far I have not been able to put my hand on anything but Jelly." Eventually, Oehler advised Cannon that it was of no use drawing up "cut and dried statements for Comrade Allard. We gave suggestions as to what is needed ... and he must know how to carry it out, especially since he agreed. A comrade in such an important post can not be handled mechanically, otherwise, the first time you turn your back he will be worse off than before. If he can make the grade himself then we have solid material, otherwise it is of little value." In any case, Oehler concluded, whatever damage Allard had done to the Left Opposition cause in the coal fields was at least partially offset by the emerging view that the Communist League of America (Opposition) had a dual presence in the mining towns of Illinois: "the Allard faction and the Oehler-Angelo faction."¹³⁹

139 The above paragraphs draw on Gerry Allard, "Twenty-two PMA Miners Framed," *The Militant*, 28 January 1933; Hugo Oehler, "Kincaid Miners Trail Starts," *The Militant*, 8 April 1933; Albert Glotzer, "Kincaid Miners Up for Trial," *The Militant*, 25 March 1933; Hugo Oehler, "Kincaid Miners Trial Starts," *The Militant*, 8 April 1933; Joe Angelo, "New League Branch in Springfield," *The Militant*, 25 March 1933; Angelo, "Illinois Hunger March Smashed," and

The task of bringing Allard along and advancing the Left Opposition in the Illinois coal fields was left largely to Cannon and those (aside from Angelo) like Oehler and Clarke, whom he directed from New York. Shachtman and Glotzer might play their parts, but their roles were clearly secondary.¹⁴⁰ As we have seen in the previous chapter, the factionalism of the dog days meant that at times their contribution, and that of others in the bickering New York branch, proved more obstructionist than helpful. Factionalism fused with finances to inhibit work that needed doing and, as Trotsky would later stress and Glotzer concede, arguments aimed at keeping Cannon himself away from the coal fields, whatever their motivation, did the Left Opposition no good. Cannon wrote privately to Swabeck. "The announcement of my delegation to the Gillespie conference, formally agreed to by unanimous vote in the National Committee, called forth a furious agitation against the 'flying trip' and a sabotage of Weber, Bleeker, and others attempted to shift the discussion to the alleged neglect of the mining situation last summer and to the vilest personal attacks on Swabeck and Cannon. Up to the last moment I lacked the bus fare to make the trip, and finally managed to get away only by securing the personal loan of a comrade's house rent money for one week." All of this threw roadblocks in the way of Cannon advancing the politics of the Left Opposition in the Illinois mining districts, as did the circulation of Shachtman factional documents to CLA members like Angelo.

Shachtman wrote to Angelo in early January 1933, enclosing a copy of the anti-Cannon factional statement, "Prospect and Retrospect." He also denig-

"Miners Hear Opposition on German," *The Militant*, 15 April 1933; Angelo, "Two Framed-Up by Peabody Coal Co.," *The Militant*, 18 March 1933; Cannon to Allard, 11 February 1933; Cannon to Allard, 17 February 1933; Oehler to Cannon, 7 March 1933; Oehler to Cannon, no date, [8 March 1933?]; Angelo to Cannon, 13 March 1933; Cannon to Angelo, 15 March 1933; Oehler to Cannon, 18 March 1933; Oehler to Angelo, 23 March 1933; Oehler to Giganti, 28 March 1933; Oehler to Cannon, no date [April 1933]; Oehler to Cannon, 26 April 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 9 March 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers.

140 See, for instance, extensive discussion of the PMA work in National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 28 March 1933; 29 March 1933; 3 April 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers. Shachtman was assigned to write an article "polemicizing in a comradely tone and spirit with the reformist views in the columns of the *Progressive Miner* and the false or ambiguous ideas conflicting with the Left Opposition standpoint voiced in the personal column of comrade Allard ('Conveyer')," but no such article was written. Glotzer knew Allard well and had connections with Angelo, with whom he met during his national tour of February – March 1932. See "Report of Comrade Al Glotzer on the National Tour (February 13–March 13, 1932)," appended to National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 18 April 1932, Box 35, File 6, GB Papers.

rated the Cannon group's reply as "a nauseating document, in the best style to which we were so unfortunately accustomed during the worst days of the fight in the party, where we all wallowed so gaily in the swamp of unprincipledness and humbug." Angelo could not discern a clear political basis for the internal turmoil rocking the New York-based National Executive Committee. To be sure, he expressed surprise at "the real and sudden awakening of Cannon" and was less than pleased with past procedures in the National Committee, citing particular actions of the Cannon group that he thought "not at all for the best interests of the League." This elicited yet another Shachtman diatribe. Cannon's "lackadaisical non-participation in the real work of the League, his dabbling solely in the factional warfare," was castigated as the cause of his lack of "credit or prestige" in the Left Opposition. "His standing in the League [has] reached a pretty low point," Shachtman asserted, explaining further, "Hence, the fury of work at the present time, calculated to impress the comrades." Indeed, Shachtman had trouble accepting that Cannon had any interests other than advancing his faction's standing. He wrote to Maurice Spector in Toronto on 18 January 1933: "Cannon is talking about leaving for an 'organizational tour' in several weeks or so. He means, organization of his faction. That makes it all the more necessary to prepare the ground among all the comrades in the ranks, so that when he arrives in this or that town he will learn that the old Moorish custom of drinking your opponent into your caucus over a cup of coffee has passed into limbo. I fear that his hopes of swinging the League into his faction by a sensational tour (personal appearance of James P. Cannon, tonight only!) are based on sand." Cannon, certainly more circumspect than Shachtman and Company, persisted, and his enthusiasm was not dampened.¹⁴¹

On the financial question, for instance, Cannon refused to concede that the League's poverty and his personal lack of resources should inhibit the Illinois

141 This has been discussed fully in the previous chapter and is outlined as well in the documents in *Dog Days*: Martin Abern and Max Shachtman, "No Financial Sabotage," 23 January 1933, 403–411; Glotzer to Abern and Shachtman, "Cannon a New Man in Chicago," 6 February 1933, 412–415; Leon Trotsky to the International Secretariat, "I am Not More Favorable to the Minority," 17 April 1933, 507–509; Glotzer to Shachtman, "Foolish and Petty Actions Did Not Help Us," 23 May 1933, 536–542. On Shachtman factionalism and the PMA see also *Dog Days*, 67; Shachtman to Joseph Angelo, 6 January 1933; Angelo to Shachtman, 23 January 1933; Shachtman to Spector, 18 January 1933; Shachtman to Angelo, 5 February 1933, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers. Cannon appears to have done his best to keep his own views of the factional situation in the League apart from his mass work in Illinois in 1933, limiting his complaints to private correspondence with trusted allies such as Swabeck. See Cannon to Swabeck, "External Advances, Internal Turmoil," 11 February 1933 in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*. Glotzer reported that while in Illinois Cannon "did not revert to the inner situation once." *Dog Days*, 414.

campaign. Cannon fought constantly within the National Executive Committee over the availability of funds to sustain League operatives in the Illinois mine fields. He wrote to George Clarke as early as September 1932, stressing that the financial difficulties that forced Clarke to depart Springfield and relocate to Chicago lay in the New York office, where the National Executive Committee appreciated insufficiently the “hardships and sacrifices” made by itinerant organizers. “The movement must be educated one way or another, to a more serious sense of responsibility toward the functionaries and field workers,” Cannon insisted, adding that, “I don’t see much sense in starving comrades out just to see how tough they will be. Especially when the bulk of our members are taking good care to suffer no belly-aches for the cause.” Throughout his stint in the Illinois coal districts, Oehler was repeatedly pressing Cannon for funds or acknowledging how his lack of money was limiting what he could do. “I will not be able to pay my hotel bill a few days from now when I want to leave Gillespie,” Oehler wrote on one occasion. He noted on another that funds he raised personally in Minneapolis were now running short and, without resources to last out the week he was going to Chicago to “raise some money ... for my activity in the coal fields.” Yet Oehler, like Cannon, was exhilarated by his work in the Illinois mine districts and the prospects for the Left Opposition. After returning from Taylorville, where he was involved in preparations for the April 1933 murder trial of 22 PMA miners, he wrote to comrades. “The kind of work one carries on here in the coal fields removes one so far from the stifling New York factional situation, that it has the effect, not of ‘making peace’ but of driving harder toward our goal of solving the internal situation in order that our faction of the three currents in the Communist movement can take its rightful place in the American labor movement. It makes a person boil when he realizes the valuable energy ‘wasted’ over ‘trifles’ with the mutual aid clique and the disintegrating tendencies when the League should be driving home its program clothed in the most elementary Marxian approach for the American worker who is on the move and is at the mercy of the bands of muddle headed Stalinists and social reformers who roam up and down and across the ‘great land of ours.’”¹⁴²

142 Cannon to Clarke, 23 September 1932; Cannon to Glotzer, 14 January 1933; Oehler to Cannon, 4 March 1933; Oehler to Cannon, no date [March 1933?]; Oehler to Cannon, Friday, no date [March 1933?]; Oehler to Cannon [copy to Swabeck], 30 March 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Cannon to Oehler, “Our Work in the PMA,” 10 April 1933, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches: The Communist League of America, 1932–1934*, 254; National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 25 August 1932; 15 September 1932, Box 35, File 6, GB Papers; Oehler, “Kincaid Miners Trial Starts,” *The Militant*, 8 April 1933.

Allard was perceived as a key to this significant work among the miners, valued precisely because of his central role in the coal fields insurgency that Oehler, Cannon, and indeed all of the CLA leadership regarded as critically important. This lent Cannon's almost constant negotiations with Allard a diplomatizing character, but even Trotsky supported handling the PMA leader with kid gloves. Cannon's first attempt to personally point out to Allard the National Executive Committee's criticisms of the anti-communism appearing in the *Progressive Miner* elicited a testy and unrepentant reply from the miner militant. Allard's sense of his importance far overshadowed his communist commitment. On the question of curbing both his paper's anti-communism and its trumpeting of both the Brookwood Labor College and Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas, Allard was almost bellicose in his refusal to even rethink what message the *Progressive Miner* was delivering to its Illinois readers:

I cannot, for the life of me, see how you fellows in New York can sit back, isolating yourselves from the masses of workers, and attempt to confusingly defend the worse wreckers that there is in the American labor movement today. ... The fact that the Brookwood may bar the Stalinites from their ranks as an institution, I believe is a good policy on their part, because the first thing that they would do would be to wreck the institution. If the Communist Party of America wants to compete with Brookwood, why haven't they established an institution of their own? ... The only things that they would have to teach workers would be a misconstruction of history, defaming every individual who happened to be critical towards some of the policies of the CP, and a program of teaching factionalism instead of real Marxism. ... On the question of Norman Thomas ... anyone who renders service in any capacity to our movement will receive due credit Norman Thomas has entered Franklin and Christian counties in Illinois and openly spoke in defiance of the authorities. This is more than what anyone has done to date. In his speeches he has openly endorsed the Progressive Miners of America. ... Do you think that the Illinois coal miners are going to listen to Communism, when Communists are agitating the highways and by-ways throughout the coal field of Illinois, trying to spill the ranks and do the most effective work for the Lewis machine and the Illinois coal operators. ... During the Mowequa catastrophe the Daily Worker carried an article blaming the officers of the P.M.A. for that disaster! Daily misrepresentations, exaggerations and vilification are spread widely on one of the most lying sheets in the American labor movement.

Suggesting that while it was true that those who were promoting the idea of a new trade union center in Illinois to challenge the American Federation of Labor were mainly job-seekers, Allard agreed that conferences of the PMA had come to the same conclusion as Cannon and the Left Opposition. Establishing such a body was premature, but Allard saw no necessity "to enter into any great deal of criticism." It was all, the PMA leader insisted, "mostly educational." Nor was there any need to criticize Allard for mistakes of "the more conservative elements" within the Progressive Miners. Bristling with resentment that the paper he edited had been scrutinized critically, Allard's back went up defensively:

I have never been censored or criticized officially by any member of the P.M.A. for my work on the Progressive Miner. Not one official of the union has in any way told me what to put in the paper. To the contrary, they have defended me when the enemies of the coal miners attacked me for being a Communist. The paper is radical. Its tone is revolutionary. It fights. And I believe that it will come up to the standard of any trade union paper in America. When the times comes that I will be dictated to as to every little particle of news that will get in the paper then it will be time for Allard to hand in his resignation. If you feel that it is necessary for you to criticize me openly for my work on the Progressive Miner, then go ahead. I will be very much discouraged of your failure to view the problems of the American workers more realistically.

Challenging the right of the CLA to even discuss the nature of his editorship of the *Progressive Miner*, Allard huffed, "the Progressive Miner is not Gerry Allard's paper. It is the property of the Illinois miners." Showing that he had a specific understanding of who was the cart, and who the horse, Allard punctuated his rejoinder to Cannon with a belligerent, "Why don't you comrades give me solidarity?"¹⁴³

Cannon chose not to reply in writing to Allard's metaphorical throwing down of his militant miner gauntlet. Instead, he seized the opportunity to attend a 29 January 1933 Conference called by the Gillespie, Illinois Trades and Labor Assembly, heavily backed by the Progressive Miners of America, in which the main order of business was discussion of the controversial intention to "formulate a new federation of labor." Cannon, as we have seen, thought

¹⁴³ Allard to Cannon, 23 January 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers. See also Cannon to Glotzer and Edwards, 19 January 1933 and Cannon to Angelo, 19 January 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 12 January 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers.

it imperative to turn back this initiative, but he and the rest of the League's National Executive Committee also noted the desirability of Jim talking directly with Gerry Allard about his policies at *The Progressive Miner*. Cannon's speech at the Gillespie gathering was apparently a *tour de force*. As 171 delegates, more than half of them from PMA locals, responded to his reasoned arguments that "the organizational basis for a new general labor movement is by no means sufficient at the present time, and ... that ... a realistic project of agitation to coordinate the work of militants inside and outside the A.F. of L" was lacking, Cannon helped reorient the PMA. The Left Opposition leader also caucused with left-wingers in the PMA, consolidated ties to CLA members/sympathizers, and addressed a mass meeting of miners that took place in relation to, but separate from, the Gillespie Conference. Cannon's obvious and enthusiastic embrace of the PMA, stood him in good stead with the ranks. But it was his critical assessment of the Communist Party that refused to descend into red-baiting, and his principled, but unambiguous, separation of the Left Opposition from rival left-wing organizations, like Muste's CPLA or the Socialist Party, that provided political direction. With respect to the creation of a rival federation of labor, all of these currents were compromised, the Stalinists by their longstanding sectarianism, and the progressives and reformists through their willingness to leave political doors open to any and all outcomes of the Gillespie Conference. Cannon proved an able ambassador of the Left Opposition in the Illinois coal district, and even Allard was impressed. He praised Cannon, letting him know that he thought the CLA leader's speech won over many delegates to the responsible position not to strike out on an adventurist path to start a new, and premature, federation of labor. *The Progressive Miner's* coverage of the Gillespie gathering featured summaries of Cannon's speeches and concluded that "the conference adopted his suggestions."

Cannon, in turn, was energized by his contact with the dissident miners. He saw the PMA as "a movement pulsing with life ... calling out new resources of proletarian energy and militancy, new hope and vision." Talking to rank-and-file Illinois miners and the young militants at their head, Cannon heard of their "epic struggles," and witnessed first-hand the possibilities inherent in "a cadre of new leaders ... who, if they still lack experience and ease of orientation in complicated problems, are, by that uncorrupted and unspoiled by the deadening routine, conservatism, and treachery of the old bureaucracy." Cannon was enthralled by the advanced positions of the PMA, which corresponded closely with the most radical sectors of the emerging Left-wing in the labor movement. They included industrial unionism, shorter workday, unemployment insurance, trade union democracy, abolition of high wages for officials, class struggle policies, and repudiation of all conservative labor officialdoms.

Cannon saw the new miners' union as a dynamic and decisive opening. He felt that it could potentially tip the balance of forces in the American workers' movement. Reveling in the possibility of the Left Opposition taking a leading role in the development of the PMA, Cannon promoted "an early revival of the Communist movement and organization among the miners." Upbeat and cordial, warm and happy, Jim was, according to Glotzer, "enthusiasm plus."

The new Cannon also took steps breaking down the animosities that long cooked in the cauldron of Chicago factionalism, with Glotzer, John Edwards, and Nathan Gould all smiles and hopeful for the future. The most cynical among them no doubt questioned Cannon's sincerity and wondered if his "turn to mass work" was a purposeful, and transitory, pose. Rose wrote personally to Jim: "I judge that Edwards is friendly to you by a warm letter I got from Rebecca. The wives of some of the leaders are weather cocks." Allard was apparently won over, and, or so Cannon thought, agreed to a plan that would see Cannon return to New York, mobilize the League around the work in the coal fields, and then himself return to Illinois for a two-month period. Cannon told Swabeck that this agreement, premised on discussions with radicals in the PMA, had as its centerpiece the need to consolidate "a firm left-wing within" the new miners' union. Miner militants proposed that Cannon himself "lead and organize the campaign," and Cannon held high hopes for new breakthroughs on the basis of "great enthusiasm among the left-wing miners and a pledge on their part to work with me in a disciplined formation to build a left-wing movement and a network of branches of the League within it." Writing to Gerry Allard in mid-February 1933, Cannon was "still hold[ing] to the plan we worked out," and closed with "warmest regards to all the comrades, and tell them I hope to be with them again, and for a protracted period, before very long." With the Left Opposition growing in unlikely places such as Davenport, Iowa (where the Communist Party was forced to debate the CLA over the question of "socialism in one country," giving rise to rank-and-file communists demanding a discussion of the ILO's program), Allard was pressed into service. He took time away from the Illinois coal fields to appear before a League Forum and talk on the ongoing mine war.¹⁴⁴ Cannon's apparently best laid plans seemed, on the sur-

144 The above paragraphs draw on National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 29 January 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers; "Cannon at Forum," *The Militant*, 4 February 1933; Cannon, "Opposition at Gillespie: League's View Triumphs at Progressive Miners Conference," *The Militant*, 11 February 1933; "171 Progressives ... James P. Cannon and Leo Krysi Speak," *The Progressive Miner*, 10 February 1933; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 105, 127; Cannon to Swabeck, "External Advances, Internal Turmoil," 11 February 1933, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932-1934*, 209-212; Cannon to

face, to be panning out, but they were destined not to be realized. The reasons for this were complicated, undeniably linked to the factional impasse of the League, which continued into 1933. But Allard also figured in the failure.

In New York, Shachtman led an assault, not on the substance of Cannon's trip to the coal fields, but on the form in which he addressed the Gillespie Convention and the message Cannon was conveying about the balance of forces in the Illinois mining districts. Coinciding with the Red Army imbroglio detailed in the last chapter, this flurry of factionalism constituted the last gasp of an entrenched but weakening personal animus to Cannon. On the one hand, Shachtman, who had little direct knowledge of the Progressive Miners of America, insisted that Cannon exaggerated the achievements of the League in the new union and in the class struggle in Illinois. In spite of Cannon-signed articles in *The Militant* that struck the appropriate chord of the PMA's dynamic possibilities and its understandable weaknesses, Shachtman wrote to factional members and CLA figures in Illinois like Joe Angelo that New York was being told that "we have the whole situation in our hand ... that 35,000 Illinois miners are 'following the lead and the line of the Left Opposition'." It is possible that the disconnect between Cannon's public positions in *The Militant* and the translation of his views in Shachtman factional correspondence backfired. Glotzer, for instance, acknowledged that it was difficult for him "to comment much on the coal situation," and that Shachtman would be better off writing to Angelo to see "if you cannot budge him to send you his view ... and the possibilities." There is no indication, however, that the Springfield Left Oppositionist could be prodded to continue his 1933 correspondence with Shachtman. He did not reply to a 3 March 1933 missive from Shachtman that concluded: "In the last few years I have not concealed from myself, at least, the conviction that Cannon has an essentially opportunistic bent, especially in trade union questions.

Allard, 11 February 1933; Karsner to Cannon, 29 May 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Glotzer to Abern and Shachtman, "Cannon a New Man in Chicago," 6 February 1933, *Dog Days*, 412–416; Ring interview with Cannon, 8 March 1974, 16–17. The issue of the formation of a new federation of labor was not decisively put to rest at the January 1933 Gillespie conference and the forces agitating for this course of action continued their call, which resurfaced at a Gillespie Trades and Labor Assembly Conference on 1 April 1933 and again, stubbornly, on 11 June 1933. Stalinists were in the forefront of such appeals. See Oehler to Cannon, 24 March 1933; Oehler to Cannon, 29 May 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Cannon, "Motion on April Gillespie Conference," 29 March 1933, *Dog Days*, 448–451. On Davenport/Des Moines, Iowa developments see *Dog Days*, 61; "The Opposition in Davenport," and "New Militant Forces Join the Ranks of the Left Opposition," *The Militant*, 22 October 1932; "New Protest Against Stalin Bureaucrats," and "Des Moines, Iowa – a New Battleground for the Left Opposition," *The Militant*, 26 November 1932; George J. Papcun, "Opposition in Davenport," *The Militant*, 22 February 1933.

In Swabeck, as you know, it is more than a 'bent'. The Illinois situation and problem is showing it. How anxious I am to have your opinion, I can hardly express, and I look forward to it soon." Meanwhile, Shachtman's anti-Cannon vitriol was poured out on to the pages of factional communication. He wrote to Sara Cowl in Minneapolis describing Cannon as "a calumniator" and "an opportunist" whose main weapons were "abuse and slander." There was also more than a suggestion that any plan Cannon and Allard hatched among the miners would not cut much ice within the Shachtman group: "To my mind, what we need in Illinois is a qualified organizer, not a two-by-four, who will *stay* there for a while, and not confine himself to fly-by night visits. Someone who will do the basic work of organizing the Opposition core, as the foundation for extending our influence." This clearly was not, in Shachtman's view, the kind of work Cannon was cut out for. "Ballyhoo is just what would kill us [in Illinois] at the present time," he wrote to Glotzer.¹⁴⁵

Shachtman was able to make much of Cannon's ostensible opportunism because Cannon did not speak to the Gillespie Conference as a member of the Communist League of America (Opposition), but rather as a "representative of a group of progressive workers in New York City." Cannon would tell Harry Ring in 1974, "That was the way I was introduced at my request." Whether there was a ban on political groups having speakers address the Conference in the name of their organization is unclear. The original call to participate in the discussion of the prospects of forming a new Progressive Federation of Labor to counter the rampant dissatisfaction with the American Federation of Labor was addressed to "All Local Unions and Organized Crafts." A previous preliminary gathering, organized for the same purpose, in December 1932, saw the CPLA, the Young People's Socialist League, and the TUUL all represented by fraternal delegates. Cannon indicated, in mid-January 1933, that it "is high time we took a hand in this business." His motion in the National Executive Committee that he go to Gillespie stated unequivocally that it is "imperatively necessary that the NC be represented there to try to influence the decision of the conference." Shachtman mounted an intense factional struggle inside the National Execut-

145 Contrast Cannon's "The Left Opposition at Gillespie," *The Militant*, 11 February 1933 with Shachtman to Angelo, 5 February 1933; Shachtman to Glotzer, 5 February 1933; Glotzer to Shachtman, 8 February 1933; Shachtman to Glotzer, 3 March 1933; Shachtman to Angelo, 3 March 1933; Shachtman to Sara Cowl, 3 March 1933, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers. Angelo had no patience for the New York office's failure to deal with routine matters and chastised Cannon for his failure to follow-up on correspondence with a Springfield worker who was a reader of *The Militant* and had submitted an article to it. See Angelo to Cannon, 5 April 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

ive Committee (and extending outside of it as well), in which Cannon's failure to speak at Gillespie as a Left Oppositionist and League leader was pilloried:

We consider it a serious political mistake that comrade Cannon appeared at the conference, was seated there, and spoke to the assembled delegates, not as a representative of the Communist League, but as a result of the incorrect and unjustifiable maneuver of introducing himself to the conference as a representative of 'left-wing workers in New York' and speaking as such a representative. To appear before the workers in this manner – 'incognito, under a mask' – was an entirely false concession to the reactionary and pseudo-progressive elements at the conference. This is not the case of a rank-and-file miner, who, in order to retain contact with the masses in a reactionary union, is sometimes obligated to deceive the fakers by denying his membership in the revolutionary organization. It is the case of an outstanding known leader and national secretary of the CLA. The subterfuge was further rendered harmful by the fact that the comrade who one week presents himself in the guise of a representative of 'left-wing workers in New York' is present the preceding and subsequent weeks, in the columns of the *Militant* which is read by miners, as the national secretary of the Communist League. The League would be making an enormous error to sanction the tactic of its leading representatives, its formal, known spokesman, acting among the miners under some 'innocuous banner', in the name of a 'harmless' group, by means of anonymity – and what inevitably accompanies such a tactic, to speak without distinguishing our position from that of the reformists and the confusionists in the PMA leadership, without conveying to the delegates and workers our critical attitude toward them.

In factional correspondence, Shachtman extended this critique, presenting Cannon's "disgraceful conduct" among the miners as evidence of a "compromising opportunism" that threatened to reduce "our 'Left Oppositionism' to ... a glorious badge behind which anything goes."

Cannon was likened to Rosmer, Naville, and Nin in France and Spain, with Shachtman urging comrades to read Trotsky's wilting criticisms of these trade union opportunists in the recently-published League pamphlet, *Communism and Syndicalism*. Newly-recruited CLA member, Gerald R. Kotz, wrote to Cannon from Newark that he had been approached by Shachtman-Abern factional lieutenant, Jack Weber, "in a decidedly surreptitious and mysterious manner." This encounter led to Kotz's "first knowledge of factional strife in the branch," and he heard Cannon branded "a demagogue, equivocator, and opportunist."

Cannon, in the face of such an assault, insisted that he was “confronted with a ruling of the arrangements committee against the admission of political organizations to the conference.” (Similar conferences in the future were organized to exclude delegates from bodies like the Left Opposition.) He argued that he then made the simple and correct choice “to come into contact with several hundred trade unionists and to explain to them our ideas on a crucial problem.” Shachtman’s “attempt to discover a ‘deviation’ in the fact that Cannon spoke at the Gillespie conference” not as a representative of the League but under the auspices of left-wing workers, was dismissed as “simply comical.”

However much Shachtman’s criticisms may have contained the ring of communist policy truth, they constituted, when considered dispassionately, partisan factional hyperbole. In terms of discrediting Cannon they had little staying power, and could be written off as motivated more by petty antagonisms and personal animosity than by a genuine interest in promoting the ideas of the Left Opposition among the Illinois miners. Swabeck reported to Cannon that Trotsky was of the view that Shachtman’s stand on the Illinois coal mining work of the League would seriously compromise him, not only in the United States, but also “in the international organization.” Cannon appreciated that Allard’s repeated mistakes constituted a repudiation of the Left Opposition’s principles, and he understood well enough that they were damaging the CLA among the miners. This weighed on him far more heavily than Shachtman’s personal attacks on Cannon’s address to the Gillespie conference. Cannon also undoubtedly worried that in the context of an escalating state attack on the Progressive Miners – the recently elected Democratic Governor had just upped appropriations financing the use of the state militia in strikebreaking – premature and unnecessary divisions in the Left-wing could well register negatively. This might lead to losses for the Left Opposition, and it would also strike blows against the growing working-class insurgency in Illinois.

In a rare mid-April 1933 solicitation of Trotsky’s advice, Cannon wrote to the leader of the International Left Opposition asking him for his views on the Allard situation. Cannon explained that Allard’s difficulties arose primarily from his “tendency to adapt himself to the mass movement and his lack of political understanding and experience.” He thought a resolution of the problem could be achieved through “direct and constant political aid.” Shachtman’s course, posed in a motion within the National Executive Committee, demanded, in Cannon’s judgment, too abrupt a resolution, which could well “force us to break with Comrade Allard prematurely, before all means of pressure and persuasion have been exhausted and before the impossibility of correcting comrade Allard has been fully demonstrated.” Trotsky may not have responded to Cannon’s query directly, but it is quite possible that he chose to reply

through a communication with the International Secretariat and copied to the National Executive Committee of the Communist League of America, or that he considered that he had already answered Cannon in this communication. Addressing Shachtman's criticisms of both Allard and Cannon, and being quite forceful in suggesting that the League's work among the Illinois miners was proceeding well, Trotsky left no doubts as to what his views were:

There is the matter of our possibilities in the Miners' Federation in Illinois. Cannon is well-known down there, he enjoys a certain authority there based especially on his past. ... Everything appeared to me to indicate that it was he who should have gone there again with a situation that is promising enough. The continuity of the work already begun also demands it. ... Comrade Allard is reproached for not emphasizing sufficiently the point of view of the Left Opposition in the trade union paper of which he is the editor. Comrade Cannon is reproached for having presented himself as a representative of progressive workers and not as a representative of the League. I cannot see any good grounds for the first reproach; I have only read two issues of the paper in question. In one of them, the editors played up the speech of comrade Cannon quite big, which is of course of great importance to us. It is quite possible that comrade Allard does not utilize all of the possibilities; but he was quite alone – or, at least, he was up to very recently. And then, it is ... a question of a trade union paper, the editing of which requires a great deal of prudence. The reproach against comrade Cannon appears to me to be dictated by a purely formalistic intransigence. I do not think it was the task of comrade Cannon to present himself as a delegate of the League, the latter being a political organization. With political demonstrations, not much is accomplished inside the trade unions; it is important to get into them, to gain authority within them, to work inside, to create a fraction there, which, in its turn, must not abuse the name of the League on each occasion, especially not as long as it remains an infinite minority. The mass union is not a meeting called by some political organization, naturally, for such things there are no cut and dried rules. ... [T]here is in the objections of [Shachtman] a certain spirit of sectarian formalism.

Trotsky followed this unambiguous communication with another equally forthright statement that refused to take up the cudgels against Cannon's ostensible opportunism. Instead, Trotsky endorsed "participation in the independent miners trade union (Illinois)" as one reflection of the expanding mass work that was a "genuine solution" to the worsening internal situation in the

American Left Opposition. Characterizing the League's activities in the PMA as a "moral success" animated by "magnificent energy," Trotsky chastised Shachtman's flawed approach to trade union questions and refused to see Cannon's actions as at all comparable to those European leftists who could not subordinate their activities in the unions to the International Left Opposition's programmatic directives. Cannon was clearly not guilty of this kind of behavior. Shachtman's "great clamor" around Cannon's Gillespie speech thus "ended with a thud." Trotsky's intervention put a stop to "the discussion, bango. Just like that that!" Cannon later exclaimed.¹⁴⁶

This was not exactly true, for the question of Allard's failures to effectively orchestrate his work within the Progressive Miners of America as a Left Oppositionist was very much tied up with Shachtman's overstated criticisms of Cannon. Shachtman's motion on the PMA, submitted to the National Executive Committee of the CLA on 24 February 1933 was far more effective in outlining the Left Opposition's critique of Allard, who was consistently sidestepping and backtracking. According to Shachtman, Allard was indistinguishable from a left social democrat, and his editing of the *Progressive Miner* left League members fuming at his refusals to confront reformist confusions. "Instead of shattering

146 The above paragraphs draw on extensive documentation. See Ring interview with Cannon, 8 March 1974, 16–18; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 105; Gillespie Trades and Labor Council, "To Form Progressive Federation of Labor," *Labor Age* (December – January 1933), 23; Joe Angelo, "Governor Strikes at Illinois Miners," *The Militant*, 17 February 1933; Cannon to Glotzer and Edwards, 19 January 1933; Oehler to Cannon, 24 March 1933; Swabeck to Cannon, 16 April 1933; Gerald R. Kotz to Cannon, 17 April 1933; Oehler to Cannon, 29 May 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 20 January 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers; Shachtman to Glotzer, 3 March 1933; Glotzer to Angelo, 3 March 1933; Shachtman to Cowl, 3 March 1933; Shachtman to Glotzer, 17 April 1933, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers, and various documents in *Dog Days*, which also suggest that Cannon was "Unable to speak as a representative of the CLA because political groups were banned" (67); Max Shachtman, "Motion on the Illinois Mining Campaign," 24 February 1933, 429–434; Leon Trotsky to the International Secretariat, "On the Situation in the American League," 7 March 1933, 468; Trotsky to the International Secretariat, "I Am Not More Favorable to the Minority," 17 April 1933, 507–509; Trotsky to Shachtman, "The European Sections will Not Support You," 1 May 1933, 529–530; Spector to Shachtman, "A Cold Douche," 24 April 1933, 518–519; Swabeck to Cannon, "International Consultation is Key," 12 May 1933, 530–533; Glotzer to Shachtman, "Foolish and Petty Actions Did Not Help Us," 23 May 1933, 536–542. I quote from the translation of Trotsky to the International Secretariat, 17 April 1933 that appears in National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 19 April 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers, which is differently worded than the translation that appears under the title "I Am Not More Favorable to the Minority," in *Dog Days*, 508–509.

the miners' illusions in the bourgeoisie, its legislature, and its state governor," Shachtman complained, "comrade Allard has been unwittingly fostering those illusions." Outside the National Executive Committee, writing to his factional allies, Shachtman was more scathing: Allard had penned "horrible statements" in the *Progressive Miner*. As the formal representative of the Left Opposition in the dissident miners' movement, Allard "successfully concealed" this fact from "99% of the miners." To Joe Angelo Shachtman wrote that, "As for Gerry, here we have a scandal which can no longer be concealed." Cannon, Oehler, and even Glotzer were more prone to see Allard's lapses, on both the mechanical questions of organizational responsibilities as well as the more important issues of political alignment, in a benign, if increasingly critical, light. They were prepared to cut Allard some slack, whereas Shachtman pressed for the League to intervene and force the miner militant to clarify "the intolerable relationship between his position and that of the Left Opposition," doing so "with the aim of coming *now* to a *final* conclusion." Cannon opposed this, and elicited Trotsky's views and support. But as time wore on, it became apparent that Allard's actions were disturbing, and growing more so with each acknowledgement of the PMA leader's incorrigibility, which his friend Glotzer described as "disgraceful." Allard's long list of transgressions included lack of cooperation with other League members; half-hearted assistance to Left Opposition work; and a refusal to support CLA policies that translated into a discernible pandering to anti-communism and reformism in public conferences of Illinois left-wing workers.

Still, Cannon cautioned Oehler not to give up on Allard: "I retain my optimistic hopes ... and am opposed to his expulsion from the League before a real effort has been made to bring him our way. This is in large part a matter of education. ... We must have patience and take time. The PMA is a big proposition, and Gerry is to a large extent the key to our further penetration of it. An abrupt and ill-considered break with him, before every possibility of an agreement for common work has been exhausted, would be light-minded folly. At the same time we cannot let matters drift any longer." Allard was routinely advised that he must change his ways, and he apparently assured Cannon that he would. The latter was clearly taken in: Cannon sang the praises of the PMA leader whom, according to Shachtman and John Edwards, the CLA National Secretary hailed as "a sterling militant in the thick of the fight." Cannon was rumored to have gone so far as to stipulate that he was prepared to propose Allard as a candidate for the National Committee in an effort to "bring him closer to us!" "Nothing less," Shachtman snorted to Glotzer, who was quick to express "a loss for words." "Negotiations" with the Illinois mine militant took on the trappings of relations with a sympathizer, Glotzer reported to Shachtman. If it was evident that Allard acted "not as a communist, but as a trade union militant ... the agreement we

made with him was correct, because it creates the possibility of saving Gerry for our movement and collaborating in the work."¹⁴⁷

This Allard-Cannon dance – one step forward, two steps backward, and a shuffle to the side – would perhaps have gone on interminably had not the unstable leadership situation within the PMA eventually forced Allard's political hand. As a left-wing union primarily opposed to the corruption and machinations of the Lewis-run UMWA, the Progressive Miners understandably harbored all manner of political elements. Its leadership and poles of political influence were composed, as Shachtman's February 1933 political dissection indicated, of at least six currents ranging from a reactionary, anti-communist Gompers-like ideological bloc through progressive cohorts like Muste's CPLA, Norman Thomas's Socialist Party, and unaligned militants desirous only of "clean unionism," to the Communist Party and the Left Opposition. In the absence of firmly established Left Opposition trade union fractions inside the PMA, which Cannon, Shachtman, and, later, Trotsky, all suggested were absolutely necessary to the functioning of revolutionaries within the dissident miners' mobilization, the Cannon-Swabeck tactical accent on building the left-wing was inevitably exposed as inadequate.

Such fractions needed to operate in a deft but principled manner, united under the banner of a revolutionary program that nevertheless was not likely, in most circumstances, to be fully unfurled. Yet there was a need for such revolutionary dissidents to unite around common policies and to constantly distinguish themselves from reformists and Stalinist bureaucrats, building among the union ranks an understanding of them as principled advocates of revolutionary policies that also advanced the labor movement. This never happened in the CLA work in the Illinois coal fields. Such recruits as Angelo could draw toward him in Springfield were small in number and largely lacking in influence

147 Relevant documents referenced in the above paragraphs include *Dog Days*: Shachtman, "Motion on the Illinois Mining Campaign," 24 February 1933, 429–434; Cannon, "Motion on April Gillespie Conference," 29 March 1933, 448–451; Shachtman, "Motion on CLA Delegate at Gillespie," 29 March 1933, 452; Cannon to Trotsky, "Request for Advice on Allard," 14 April 1933, 498–499; Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*; Cannon to Oehler, "For a Realistic Policy at Gillespie," 30 March 1933, 239–242; Cannon to Allard, "Our Work in the PMA," 10 April 1933, 249–252; Cannon to Oehler, "On Collaboration with Allard," 10 April 1933, 253–254; Cannon to Oehler, "Allard at the Turning Point," 20 April 1933, 255–256; Oehler to Cannon, 4 April 1933 [misdated 4 March 1933]; Oehler to Cannon, 4 April 1933; Cannon to Angelo, 10 April 1933; Oehler to Cannon, no date [22 April 1933?]; Oehler to Cannon, 26 April 1933; Cannon to Oehler, 27 April 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Shachtman to Glotzer, 17 April 1933; Glotzer to Shachtman, 22 May 1933, Roll 11, Reel 3354, Ms Papers.

in the union. League field operatives such as Oehler, Clarke, and Carmody, or Chicago/New York leadership figures sent to the mining district to do specific work (Cannon, Shachtman, Swabeck, Glotzer, Edwards) were no substitute for the trade union fractions that needed to be built. Individuals, however effective, could only, even at the best of times, develop an episodic presence.

Finally, there was the case of Gerry Allard. He proved, time and time again, to be more of a “freelance” than a Left Oppositionist. He was overly concerned with his prestige among the miners and unwilling to do very much in the way of building bases from which the CLA could advance. Allard was the key to Left Opposition work in the Illinois coal fields who simply would not turn. As a result, CLA interventions in the coal fields seemed to drift unconsciously towards shoring up the left-wing at the expense of recruiting members to the League and establishing trade union fractions. Oehler wrote to Angelo from Gillespie, bemoaning the difficulty he was having in “talking up a left wing group in the PMA,” insisting that “I only know we must work up the left wing group and pull them out where they belong at the right time.” He closed, “Will try to have a left wing group and a member or two before I leave this town.” In the end such concessions to building the left-wing deepened the dependency on the very human element, Gerry Allard, who could not transcend his own limitations in the absence of Left Opposition fractions that might have stiffened his revolutionary resolve.¹⁴⁸

With an orientation accenting the consolidation of the left-wing within the PMA, Allard was destined to be battered from pillar to post, for the union was crisscrossed with contradictory local leaderships. Gillespie and Bendl, where Allard was rooted, were strongholds of the PMA left-wing and had an entrenched and influential Stalinist presence, embedded in the Unemployed Council and prone to push, through the Trades and Labor Assembly, calls for a new federation of labor. As we have noted, this “bad penny” kept turning up at Gillespie conferences, fitting comfortably with the Communist Party’s Third Period call for “Red” unionism, Cannon’s relatively successful push against it in January 1933 notwithstanding.¹⁴⁹

148 See *Dog Days*, 68–69, and documents published there: Shachtman, “Motion on the Illinois Mining Campaign,” 24 February 1933, 430–431; Trotsky, “Trade Union Problems in America,” 23 September 1933, 591–593; Oehler to Angelo, 25 March 1933; Cannon to Oehler, 30 March 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

149 See Oehler to Cannon, 24 March 1933; Oehler to Cannon, 29 March 1933; Cannon to Oehler, 30 March 1933; Oehler to Cannon, 4 April 1933; Cannon to Oehler, 10 April 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Cannon, “Motion on April Gillespie Conference,” 29 March 1933, *Dog Days*, 448–451; Oehler, “2nd Gillespie Meeting: Conference Again Rejects Federation Plan,” *The Militant*, 3 April 1933.

An orgy of red-baiting erupted in the Illinois coal fields in April 1933, emanating from mainstream newspapers like the Taylorville *Daily Breeze*. A conservative backlash swept the mining towns as the Kincaid trial of 22 PMA members highlighted the potential of armed struggle in the coal fields. Largely Communist-led unemployment marches were viciously smashed by the state. The heightened anti-communism of this period was also not unrelated to a struggle within the new miners' movement. An old UMWA reform bureaucracy, still ensconced in the Progressive Miner leadership and led by the PMA's President, Claude E. Pearcy, was about to capitulate to the coal operatives' demand for a reduced wage scale that had itself been the cause of the formation of the dissident miners' union in 1932. PMA locals on strike for months, were defiantly holding out against cutting the daily wage scale to \$5.00. In April 1933, the right wing leadership of the PMA finally threw in the towel, and left-wing centers like Gillespie and Bendl were vocal critics of the new contract.¹⁵⁰

All of this precipitated anti-communist outcry, a significant component of which was directed against Allard as one of the most identifiable left leaders in the Progressive Miners. The mud-slinging, reinforced by a sheriff's raid on Allard's home which resulted in the seizure of newspaper clippings and other documents, descended into a quagmire of accusations and rebuttals, in which Gerry Allard's ostensibly unstable and alcoholic brother, Pete, was reputed to have declared that the PMA was under the control of the Communist Party. Pete Allard's estranged wife, Raymonda, promptly issued a denunciation of her dead-beat spouse and a defense of the Progressive Miners of America and her brother-in-law, Gerry, whom she insisted was upright, honest, and a support to her and her child. She repudiated Pete's statements as false, the product of a deranged mind exacerbated by an insatiable quest for money, a refusal to work for an honest day's pay, and habitual drunkenness. At the same time, an April 1933 issue of the Taylorville *Daily Breeze* reprinted what Allard claimed was a fabricated Chicago speech delivered by the *Progressive Miner* editor, in which he was introduced as a National Executive Committee member of the Communist Party. Progressive Miner militants, and especially the movement's women's auxiliaries, rallied to defend Allard.¹⁵¹

150 Oehler, "New Illinois Mine Contract: Left Wing Criticizes Provisions of Two-Year Agreement," *The Militant*, 1 April 1933; Angelo, "Illinois Hunger March Smashed," *The Militant*, 15 April 1933; Oehler, "Kincaid Miners Trial Starts," *The Militant*, 2 April 1933; Oehler, "Prospects of Development of the Illinois Miners," *The Militant*, 13 May 1933; Oehler to Angelo, 23 March 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

151 See "Mrs. Peter Allard Declares Husband's Story False; States He Has Been Ill Several Years," *The Progressive Miner*, 21 April 1933; "Hart 'Expose' Flops; Miners' Reaction Cold Gerry

For his part, Allard issued a signed statement in the *Progressive Miner* of 14 April 1933 that seriously misrepresented his politics and denied, in effect, his affiliation with revolutionary communism. If Allard rightly refused being identified as a member of the Communist Party, his CLA comrades were understandably disturbed that the miner militant opted to obfuscate matters by constructing himself, not as a revolutionary, but as a pluralist advocate of labor unity at all costs:

I have been liberal in my attitude toward all organizations of labor. When I attacked the Communist Party it was only because I was placed in a defensive position due to bitter and misleading attacks that were made against me. My attitude on all factions, groupings, parties and philosophies is one of the most tolerant character because I appreciate the value of unity in the labor movement and know further that it is practicable. ... The allegations made against me cannot withstand the least effort at substantiation. The accusation that I was introduced at the meeting as a member of the national Executive Committee of the Communist Party would place me in the light, first, of working in the Progressive Miners of America under false pretenses and second, would brand me as falsely representing another organization. This charge is here repudiated definitely.¹⁵²

That this statement denied Allard's Communist Party past and sidestepped his politics as a leading member of the Communist League of America outraged all Left Oppositionists. It was condemned by Cannon specifically as "an unworthy subterfuge" that "in no way fulfills [Allard's] obligations as a Communist and a member of the Left Opposition" and "deals a blow to the union, to the left wing, and to the League." A turning point was reached, with Cannon realizing that, "It will be a real blow to the League to lose [Allard], and we should not leave anything undone to help him find his way together with us. But it will be a hundred times a bigger blow to the League to condone the policy he has

Allard and Claude Percy Ridicule Allegations of Communism," *The Progressive Miner*, 21 April 1933; "Who Pays for This False Propaganda: Brother of Gerry Allard Says Progressive Miners Union is Backed by Communist Party," *The Progressive Miner*, 28 April 1933; "Pete Allard Weakens," and "They Rage," *The Progressive Miner*, 12 May 1933. Rank-and-file and women's auxiliary defenses of Allard are found in "On with the Fight! Say Auxiliary Leaders," *The Progressive Miner*, 21 April 1933; "Rank and File Answer Attacks Against Editor of the Progressive Miner," *The Progressive Miner*, 28 April 1933.

¹⁵² Gerry Allard, "A Lying Story Exposed," *The Progressive Miner*, 14 April 1933.

been following, especially in this last statement of his." Abern and Shachtman were more scathing, condemning Allard's resort to a "miserable 'stratagem' [as] beneath the dignity of an active and prominent Communist."¹⁵³

Faced with ultimatums to measure up, Allard apparently agreed to some directives, but balked at others, resisting especially a public declaration on the relationship of Stalinism and Communism and refusing to provide a signed statement in the *Progressive Miner* on his Left Opposition communist views. Oehler also thought Allard's commitment to organizing the left-wing in the PMA was "half-hearted." Outside of Left Opposition circles, militants like the Woman's Auxiliary leader, Agnes Burns Wieck, thought Allard a genuine democrat who simply wanted to edit a paper, the *Progressive Miner*, in which all voices, including the right-wing leadership of the union, were allowed their say. Be this as it may, Allard clearly knew how to hold out just enough to keep his Left Opposition comrades from expelling him, and over the next months Cannon and others would consistently be disappointed with the PMA leader's failure to live up to his end of a number of agreements.

Oehler wrote to Cannon about the general situation in the northern Illinois coal districts: "In the Gillespie area the red-baiting campaign was at its height. Everybody had run for cover and the Stalinists were far underground. In Benld, their stronghold, they were driven out, unemployment council busted up and no more meetings allowed. ... In the Springfield area things have not changed much ... it has always been more reactionary ... however the little mine towns on its outskirts could be seen as standing more to the right than before." A month later, with Allard oscillating wildly in his political orientation and the ensconced officialdom of the Progressive Miners of America becoming, in Glotzer's words, "more and more openly a prototype of the Lewis leadership ... under the influence and direction of [a] lawyer ... some suspect of being an agent of the UMWA," Springfield was the center of an anti-communist witch-hunt. Old left-wingers and Left Opposition contacts such as John Watt, George Voyzey, Freeman Thompson, and League mainstay Joe Angelo, were threatened with expulsion. Allard gave some signs of rallying to their defense, but yet again failed to deliver. It was a difficult and trying situation for Oehler, Angelo, and Allard, all of whom faced a bellicose and revived right-wing as well as the maneuvers of the Communist Party.

153 Cannon, "Allard Must Take a Stand Against Redbaiting," and Abern and Shachtman, "Allard Discredits Left Opposition," 19 April 1933, *Dog Days*, 514–515; Cannon to Allard, 10 April 1933, Box 49, Folder 7, GB Papers; Cannon to Angelo, 20 April 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

It was Allard who was emphatically in the most direct line of fire. As usual, the *Progressive Miner* editor ducked and waffled. Shachtman conveyed his disgust with Allard to Trotsky, who pointed out that the PMA leader needed to be “surrounded by an organization of the L.O. **on the spot**, subordinated to it, made to participate in it and to follow out its decisions.” There was no disagreement with this diagnosis, but it was easier said than done. Shachtman was convinced that Allard would “never be a genuine Communist. There is something bad in his blood politically.” Acknowledging Allard’s militancy, Shachtman nonetheless concluded contemptuously that the Illinois maverick “has an unmistakably Menshevik odor.” With the Stalinists “moving in on the Illinois situation,” as Glotzer wrote to Shachtman, Allard gave signs of temporizing in ways that sidled up to the Communist Party left-wingers in the coal fields. Articles in the *Progressive Miner* reflected this, one being described by Glotzer as “a scandalous bit of scribbling written by a Communist.” Rose Karsner wrote to Cannon in the aftermath of the Chicago Mooney Conference, where yet another agreement had been struck, but not consummated, with Allard:

It looks like Gerry took you in again. Fine promises, then goes back and writes a signed report in the *Progressive Miner* in which he mentions everyone at the conference except the L.O. He seems to be catering to the Party this time. From right to left and back again but never straight with us.

Without any discussion with the Left Opposition, Allard signed a July 1933 call for a Columbus, Ohio conference on trade unionism that constituted a bloc of Muste’s CPLA and the Communist Party.

As Cannon would later explain to Allard, in being formed entirely outside of any knowledge on the part of rank-and-file members of these two bodies or, indeed, any other left organizations, the conference violated understandings of the Left Opposition as to how united fronts should be built. “We must define our policies for ourselves and our members must act according to these policies,” Cannon reminded Allard, in what was an elementary admonition. “That is why we insist that you should have previously consulted us on this question so we could have discussed it with you.” At the end of July Cannon was writing to Glotzer, reporting that communications between Oehler and Allard had broken down completely.

We have to make an end of the present ambiguous relationship one way or the other. The Chicago agreement which raised our hopes so high apparently came to nothing. But that is not our fault and does not argue against

the agreement. It shows that we tried to compromise and come to a working arrangement with him. He will be the greatest loser if our ways have to part at last, but the Left Opposition will suffer for a time. We must not forget that.

Cannon wondered if Glotzer might possibly make a trip south from Chicago to see Allard before final action was taken. If anything could have been done to reverse Allard's longstanding vacillation, it was now too late. The redbaiting campaign of previous months had borne particularly rotten fruit. Miner militants with Left Opposition leanings were being beaten on the street, driven to political retreat; the right-wing within the PMA was consolidating its grip on the union; steps were being taken to expel Joe Angelo from the now less-than-dissident miners' union.

The right-wing's attack on the PMA's left-wing culminated, in June 1933, in the dismissal of Allard from his editor's post at the *Progressive Miner*. Glotzer reported to Shachtman on the worsening situation in the Illinois mining districts:

The situation in the coal fields is not so good. Allard has been removed finally from the editorship. Whether or not this will wake him up remains to be seen. My doubts are very strong ones. I think that if he has not been able to see any clearer than he has up to now, it is hopeless. If he fails us at this moment, in which he has a chance to redeem himself, then there must be no hesitation in breaking relations with him. Baldwin was in the field trying to patch up things between Allard and the Union officials. Allard denied to Baldwin that he was a member of the Opposition. Can you fathom such conduct? I forwarded this information to the NC, proposing that the NC instruct Allard to toe the mark at once or else he will be expelled from the Opposition. His activity, up to now, had been no aid to the Opposition or the union. His woeful unpolitical brain could never teach him that our policy had in mind precisely the advancement of the interests of the union. But Gerry cannot see the relation at all. He sees on the one hand, the political organization and on the other, the union and Gerry is primarily a unionist, in spite of his years in the movement. His work has had only a discrediting effect. If now, he should accept another kind of job from the union he will be finished. The Party acknowledges that if Gerry takes advantage of the situation brought about by his expulsion, it is possible to build a powerful movement of the left wing. If not then he is through. All the miners support him and are against his removal.

Cannon gave it one last try, writing to Allard on 7 August 1933, pleading with him to inform the National Office of his “plans for conducting the fight against the officials of the P.M.A. and their treacherous policy. We have not heard one word from you regarding your removal from the paper and since that time this lack of information makes it very difficult to cooperate with the comrades in Illinois.” With the Progressive Miners “in a very dangerous position,” Cannon stressed that “A definite program and concerted action of the left wing is now especially necessary. At any rate the Left Opposition should do everything in its power to prevent another betrayal of the miners and to brand all traitors and half traitors by their real names. I do not need to tell you how much your failure to communicate with us, and your individualistic line of action, in these critical times has weakened and demoralized the work of the Left Opposition.” Insisting that Allard had to discuss with his comrades what he was doing, and that there remained hopes within the Communist League of America “to re-establish and maintain cooperation” with him, Cannon nonetheless made it clear that a prompt communication was mandatory. None was apparently forthcoming.

At this point a conjunction of developments wrote *finis* to Allard’s relationship with the Left Opposition. The right-wing leadership of the Progressive Miners capitulated to the bosses and followed a course that obscured any hint of the origins of the movement in opposing the John L. Lewis officialdom of the United Mine Workers. Internationally, Trotsky initiated the call for the ILO to break decisively from the Communist International. Cannon responded by urging left-wingers in the United States trade unions to “turn their backs on the Stalinist paper unions and put a cross over the whole experiment” of Third Period sectarianism. Swabeck prepared to tour the hold-outs of the Left Opposition in Illinois, Springfield and Staunton, in October 1933, and Angelo’s influence in the Springfield Socialist Party moved that body to consider breaking from the Second International and entering into negotiations with the aim of joining the nascent forces of an about-to-be formed Fourth International.¹⁵⁴

154 The above paragraphs rely on a wide array of sources, among them: Cannon, “Red-Baiting in Illinois: The P.M.A. Under Fire,” *The Militant*, 29 April 1933; Wieck, *Woman from Spillertown*, 152–154; Cannon, “Allard Must Take a Stand Against Redbaiting,” 19 April 1933 and Abern and Shachtman, “Allard Discredits Left Opposition,” 19 April 1933, *Dog Days*, 513–518; Harold R. Stevenson to Cannon [March 1933]; Angelo to Cannon, 5 April 1933; Cannon to Stevenson, 10 April 1933; Oehler to Cannon, [no date, April 1933]; Cannon to Oehler, 20 April 1933; Cannon to Angelo, 20 April 1933; Oehler to Cannon, 22 April 1933; Oehler to Cannon, 26 April 1933; Karsner to Cannon, 9 May 1933; Oehler to Cannon, 29 May 1933; Oehler to Cannon, “Report on PMA,” 29 May 1933; Cannon to Glotzer, 28 July 1933; Cannon to Allard, 7 August 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Shachtman to Abern, 22 June 1933, Roll 3/Reel

Allard played little or no role in this denouement, at least not as a CLA member. He ceased being a functioning component of the Left Opposition in April 1933. Muste's leading labor lieutenant, Louis Budenz, cultivated ties with Allard in August 1933, travelling to Gillespie and Springfield with his wife-to-be Margaret; the couple consolidated a relationship with the Allards, discussing the possibility of organizing the unemployed in the desolate mine towns of Illinois. Budenz's reputation as an effective organizer, and the Musteite success in establishing Unemployed Leagues in Ohio and Pennsylvania that boasted memberships approaching 150,000, clearly resonated with Allard. Sometime in the fall of 1933 his relationship with the Communist League of America was severed and he joined A.J. Muste's Conference for Progressive Labor Action. Glotzer provided a post-mortem:

Allard was drifting and has finally drifted away from us. As a revolution-ist he had only one course to follow: the organization of a left wing in the union aiming for a struggle against the Right Wing which consolidated control of the union. Allard did little or nothing in this direction. ... The officialdom has utilized Allard precisely as any Right Wing confronted with a 'communist' editor. They kept him on the road constantly speaking. He came in only to put out the paper. When that task was complete he was out of Gillespie once more. The aim of this tactic is obvious. To keep Allard from the Center. Allard fell for this hook, line and sinker and has developed the thought of his indispensability to the union. ... The idea that he is the only one who can edit a paper and because of that holds a 'balance of power' is nonsense. What could prevent the union from bringing in any editor they pleased? I am convinced that Allard's

3346, MS Papers; Glotzer to Shachtman, 4 June 1933; 2 July 1933, Roll 11/Reel 3354, MS Papers; Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932-1934*, 249-259; Hugo Oehler, "Stalinists in Bloc with Musteites, Retard Progress," and "Columbus Unemployed Confab forms Dual National Organization," *The Militant*, 15 July 1933; Oehler, "John L. Lewis Betrays Miners at Hearing," *The Militant*, 26 August 1933; Cannon, "The Cleveland Fiasco," *The Militant*, 9 September 1933; Cannon, "The Left Wing Needs a New Policy and a New Leadership," *The Militant*, 23 September 1933; "Swabeck National Tour Begins," and "Joint Declaration for New International," *The Militant*, 23 September 1933; "For a New Party and a New International," *The Militant*, 30 September 1933; Oehler to Cannon, 17 March 1933 and Glotzer to National Executive Committee, 16 April 1933, both in National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 19 April 1933; Swabeck, "Report on National Tour," and Angelo, "Report on Springfield Socialist Party Branch," in CLA, Minutes, 23 November 1933; 4 December 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers. Allard's dismissal as editor of *The Progressive Miner* elicited rank-and-file protests, prompting a defensive statement by the Executive Board. See "Statement by Executive Board," *The Progressive Miner*, 30 June 1933.

editorship is the result of a plan to neutralize him and then assimilate him completely. Allard, under such circumstances, should have realized that he would sooner or later, if he remained true to the movement, have to break with the officialdom, and therefore prepare his ground now. He covered almost every coal camp in Illinois and nowhere is there a visible sign of a left-wing grouping. He is in a position, better than anyone else, to engage in such work. The fact that he has done little or nothing is evidence that Allard does not mind this little bit of 'neutralizing' or perhaps even 'assimilation'. ... The Opposition cannot afford to allow such acts to go by without serious action on its part. ... I am prepared to say that Allard's activity is unbecoming a Communist, let alone a member of the Left Opposition.¹⁵⁵

And yet Glotzer, like Cannon, stuck by Allard critically, hoping against hope that the miner Left Oppositionist would do the right thing.¹⁵⁶

Fairly early in this process, in February 1933, Cannon wrote to Allard with "some good news." He was in touch with a comrade "who can supply some excellent material in the way of an economic analysis of the coal industry, of the profits of the various mines and companies, of the difference in the profit rate between the organized and unorganized field, etc." Having worked on Wall Street, this comrade could track down the connections of the coal companies and "show who is back of them," submitting material regularly for *The Progressive Miner*. Cannon apparently thought Allard, one of his *bona fide* proletarians, could use the help of a New York intellectual. The comrade who he promised could write useful articles on the political economy of the coal fields was named B.J. Field.¹⁵⁷

155 Glotzer to National Executive Committee, 16 April 1933, in National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 19 April 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers. On Budenz and Allard in August 1933 see Margaret R. Budenz, *Streets* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1979), 108–115, 120. On the Musteites and the Illinois miners see Hentoff, *Peace Agitator*, 87–88; A.J. Muste, "In the Lincoln Country," *New Republic*, 19 September 1934, while Rosenzweig, "Radicals and the Jobless: The Musteites and the Unemployed Leagues, 1932–1936," and Ted Selander, "The Death March in Toledo," *The Christian Century* (21 November 1934), 1492–1493 address unemployment struggles.

156 The discussion of Allard and the Progressive Miners of America obviously recasts somewhat the tendency in some Trotskyist circles to see Allard in an entirely favorable light. See International Bolshevik Tendency, ed., Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program: The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (London: Bolshevik Publications, 1998), 104–105, 134.

157 Cannon to Allard, 11 February 1933, Reel 3, JPC Papers. See also B.J. Field, "Super-Exploitation in So. Illinois Drives Miners to a Militant Revolt," *The Militant*, 17 February 1933.

7 B.J. Field: A Napoleon among New York's French Chefs

Cannon's frustrations were many. The difficulties of keeping the Left Opposition afloat financially were hard enough without dealing with everything else he had to handle. If New York seemed a hotbed of petty bourgeois intellectuals, an environment that Cannon, in 1932–33, proposed trading in for the more down-to-earth proletarian habitat of the Illinois coal fields, Gillespie gave him a different kind of headache. In Gerry Allard he confronted the trade union leader who could not, for all of his willingness to sign on to the program of the Left Opposition, be assimilated to the perspective and practice of revolutionary politics. Cannon's view that the half-baked intellectualized New York Communist League of America needed to be lifted up by branches of *bona fide* working-class revolutionaries steeped in the collective experience of the industrial proletariat unraveled over the course of 1933 as the hopes placed in Allard and the Progressive Miners of America dissipated. This was bad enough. But soon Cannon would be plagued by an intellectual who managed to become, with the Left Opposition's help, a trade union leader in the midst of a mass struggle.

B.J. Field coupled Allard's attractions (without the PMA figure's abilities) to leading mass mobilizations, and his consequent dismissal of those very Trotskyists who helped him mount the rostrum of the class struggle. This combined with Field's certainty that his adroit sense of strategy and his broad knowledge was more than sufficient to secure victories for laboring people in the sector that he now addressed, New York's hotels and restaurants. Cannon described Field as the Left Opposition's "brilliant intellectual prodigy," a figure who managed, by being in the right place at the right time, to rise from nothing until he had "suddenly become everything. His picture was in all the New York papers. He was the leader of a great mass movement. ... He began to ... conduct himself generally, like a Napoleon, as he thought, but in reality like a schoolboy."

Common perspectives on what had happened in Illinois, as well as recognition throughout the League that Cannon's revived leadership and active involvement in the day-to-day work of the Left Opposition were genuine and ongoing developments, led to a certain "diminution of the sharp faction fight between [the Shachtman forces] and the Cannon group." It was at this point that Field and his followers in New York "maneuvered themselves into the unenviable position of increasing the turbulence and violence" characterizing life in the American Trotskyist movement. Like Weisbord, whose whirlwind presence in the CLA created such havoc, Field managed, for a time, to ingratiate himself with Trotsky and, as Cannon's communication to Allard suggested, cultivate a sense of his considerable potential. Eventually Field, like Allard, would

pose the question for Cannon and the Communist League of America: "Shall trade union functionaries determine the party line and lay down the law to the party, or shall the party determine the line and lay down the law to the trade union functionaries?"¹⁵⁸

B.J. Field (Max Gould) and his wife Esther joined the Communist League of America (Opposition) in August 1931, having almost no organizational experience in the left, outside of a brief stint in the pacifist and socialist movements of the late World War I era. A graduate of Columbia University, fluent in French and German, B.J. Field spent a part of the early 1920s in Europe, before becoming a successful Wall Street analyst, specializing in the economics of petroleum. The stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression pushed the Fields in the direction of revolutionary socialism, and they joined the Left Opposition. B.J. Field's facility as an economic journalist was quickly harnessed by *The Militant*, and he published at least 12 signed articles on a wide range of economic topics between July 1931 and January 1932; after only six months as a member of the League, Field had a regular column called "The Economic Month" in the organization's newspaper.¹⁵⁹

Neither Field nor his wife Esther had sufficient grasp of how to function as communists, however, and their first encounter with the Left Opposition was anything but a smooth integration into the League's day-to-day activities. Their attendance at formal CLA branch meetings and conferences was lackadaisical, and they liked to conduct private study sessions at their Lower East Side apartment, its walls lined with books and records. In the factional atmosphere of the League in 1931–32 this was a recipe for political disaster. As the Fields came to be associated with the turmoil of the New York branch, the Left Opposition demanded that their reading groups and study classes be placed under its direction. This the Fields refused to countenance. They were promptly

158 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 130–133; Shachtman to Glotzer, "Implementing the Action Program," 7 September 1933, *Dog Days*, 583.

159 Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 107; B.J. Field and Esther Field to Executive Committee, NY Branch, Communist League of America, 11 March 1933, in National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 18 March 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers. On Field's writing for *The Militant* see the following: "Economic Crisis: What Next?" 4 July 1931; "After the London Conference: The Buck is Passed to Germany," and "Behind the Miners Strike: Economic Decay of Soft Coal," 1 August 1931; "Steel Wage Cuts Forecast: Analysis Shows Steel Barons' Plans to Slash at Workers," 12 September 1931; "Perspectives on the American Crisis," 19 September 1931; "Banking Crisis in the US: Attempt to Defend Gold Standard Proves Costly," 24 October 1931; "Railway Bosses Drop Their Masks," 31 October 1931; "The Economic Month," 14 November 1931, 12 December 1931, and 2 January 1932; "Social Changes and Prospects," 26 December 1931; "In the Workmen's Circle," 2 January 1932.

tried and expelled, with the Shachtman factional branch leader, Sylvia Bleeker, playing a prominent role in the proceedings. All of this unfolded in May 1932 within the New York local and then, again, in the National Executive Committee. Cannon thought that the case against the Fields should have been “adjusted” because it lacked substance in the way of political transgression. Field was clearly something of a loose cannon, however, and without moorings in the factional infighting of this period he was vulnerable and was cast aside. Shachtman moved the motion inside the National Executive Committee to expel B.J. and Esther Field, it being unanimously accepted as “the culmination point of the discussions and disputes which the League has had with these comrades virtually from the day they joined the organization and puts a necessary conclusion to these disputes.” That, however, was not to be the end of it. As Cannon recalled, “Here was a big shot intellectual, who had worked on Wall Street journals, who had condescended to join a little Trotskyist movement – and now all of a sudden a bunch of young, unimportant people wanted to put him under discipline. ... So Field, this man with his great knowledge and ability – he decided he was going to show these New York yokels a few things.”¹⁶⁰

Their expulsion barely announced, the Fields popped up in Prinkipo. There they managed to work themselves for a time into Trotsky’s inner circle, Field’s capabilities as an economic journalist impressing the leader of the International Left Opposition [ILO]. Trotsky was soon passing articles written by the expatriate American on to comrades in Britain. As Cannon himself noted, Field “*was* a very learned man, a statistician of distinction, a good writer, a really first-class intellectual who knew economic data thoroughly because he had dealt with it all his life. ... Field had all kinds of data the Old Man was thirsting to get hold of, so as to give them some political interpretation.” So enamored of Field was Trotsky that he invited him to sit in on the first September 1932 discussions of the Turkey-based pre-conference commission charged with preparing drafts of documents to be discussed at a forthcoming meeting of all bodies associated with the ILO. Field was then appointed, along with Trotsky’s political secretary, Jan Frankel, and leader of the French Communist Ligue, Pierre Frank, as part of a three-person committee that would address the critically important issues

¹⁶⁰ Jacobs, *Is Curly Jewish?* 79; B.J. Field and Esther Field to Executive Committee, NY Branch, Communist League of America, 11 March 1933, in National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 18 March 1933, Box 32, File 9 and “Motion by Shachtman: Fields’ Case,” 2 May 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers; Abern, Shachtman, and Glotzer, “The Situation in the American Opposition: Prospect and Retrospect,” 4 June 1932, *Dog Days*, 273; James P. Cannon, *Speeches to the Party: The Revolutionary Perspective and the Revolutionary Party* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 84–86.

associated with developments in Spain. As startling as it might seem, Field soon dominated the proceedings, doing so with striking self-confidence.¹⁶¹

When Cannon and others in the New York leadership of the American Left Opposition began to get wind of Field's apparently consolidating relations with Trotsky and the European sections they were not amused. Cannon drafted a letter to Trotsky and the International Secretariat in October 1932 protesting Field's articles being used to open discussions of the February 1933 ILO conference, where the economic crisis of capitalism was to be analyzed. Undoubtedly frustrated by the apparent ability of figures like Weisbord and Field to travel to Turkey and immediately secure not only Trotsky's ear, but also, apparently, something of his political heart, Cannon pointed out that the author of these essays "was recently expelled from the New York branch of the American League." He added that it was commonly understood among ILO sections that expelled groups and individuals would be denied the right to participate in the forthcoming international conference. How then, Cannon queried, could it come to pass that "the preparation of one of the important questions of the conference" had been assigned "to an expelled member of the American League, which has been in existence for four years and has some solid accomplishments to its credit." Cannon later described this period as one of testing Trotsky, of finding out whether he would try to defend his relations with the expelled Field and demand his reinstatement in the American League, lapsing into a domineering imperiousness or an arbitrary sarcasm, as "soul-searing."

Trotsky's prompt response was not quite the apology Cannon would later present it as, but the outcome was nonetheless recognition enough that the rights of the American Left Opposition would not be overridden by international dictates. Field was, for Trotsky, an "academician" whose knowledge and talents could be usefully drawn on without "delivering the organization" to him. "We need someone who follows attentively the world economy day in, day out, and who is capable of giving an accounting of it to himself and others," Trotsky stated, adding, "I have looked for such an economic specialist in the Left Opposition, to no avail. I hardly think that we will soon find another with Field's qualifications." Writing again in November 1932, with Field about to return to the United States, Trotsky assured the Communist League of America that he had no intention of "wanting to take its organizational decision lightly," but he remained convinced that his personal collaborations with the economist were of the utmost importance to "international theoretical work." Convinced

161 Trotsky to Groves, "After the British Expulsions," 6 September 1932, and "Minutes of the Commission: I & II," in *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement 1, 1929-1933*, 149-162; Cannon, *Speeches to the Party*, 84-87.

that Field “went to Europe to find his way to the Left Opposition,” Trotsky insisted that his new-found economic expert was, unlike Weisbord, “honest and fully valuable in principle” and had no intentions of establishing a “competing organization” or of becoming an enemy of the League. Field’s inability to work within the discipline of a communist organization, Trotsky implied, might well be overcome. At the very least he could be neutralized so as to contribute to the revolutionary cause without disrupting it organizationally. Suggesting that upon re-establishing himself in New York, Field would “offer his services to the League without simultaneously raising the question of his reinstatement,” Trotsky thought this would benefit his American comrades in the “field of winning the intellectual Marxists.”

And so the prodigal Field returned to the CLA, Trotsky’s qualified blessings in his back pocket. Cannon, meanwhile, was content that Trotsky had proven himself. In promoting Field’s strengths and potential, Trotsky did not heavily-handedly dictate to Cannon and others in the National Committee that they must reintegrate an unruly and undisciplined expelled member, except in so far as they themselves determined that it was indeed possible to do so. Trotsky thus showed himself to Cannon and others that he was an entirely different kind of leader than Stalin, and had no interest in subordinating comrades in a particular national section. As Sam Gordon recalled, Cannon, Shachtman and others in New York were prepared to take a firm stand against Trotsky had “the Old Man” not been “conciliatory.” A “grave disagreement” was thus averted.¹⁶²

162 The above paragraphs draw on Swabeck [Cannon] to Trotsky and International Secretariat, “On Relations with B.J. Field,” 6 October 1932, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 163–165; Trotsky to the CLA National Committee, “A Reply on Field and Weisbord,” 20 October 1932, *Dog Days*, 345–348; Trotsky to the CLA, “On Field’s Future Role,” 13 November 1932, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1932]*, 301. Cannon’s representation of Trotsky’s communications on Field as an apology appears in *Speeches to the Party*, 85–87 which also presents the Cannon-Trotsky correspondence around Field as tense: “I will admit that this was the greatest emotional crisis of my life,” Cannon claimed. “I fully expected that Trotsky was going to write back an arrogant letter and tell us what a bunch of shoemakers we were; that the importance of Field’s articles so far outweighed the constitution of the N.Y. branch that we should wake up and recognize what time of day it was. I thought I could never accept that, because that would reduce the American party to nothing but a puppet; and you could never build a party that hasn’t any rights of its own, any rights to enforce its own discipline.” See also Cannon, “The Problem of Party Leadership,” in Les Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1940–43: The Socialist Workers Party in World War II* (New York: Pathfinder, 1975), 362–363. The extent to which Cannon invested a great deal in facing Trotsky squarely on the issue of Field cannot be abstracted from the factional impasse within which the League was suspended in the fall of 1932. Cannon’s struggle to revive himself and his leading role in the Left Opposition in this same period would undoubtedly have been dealt a severe blow had he faced

This, of course, was not to be the end of it. Field was a man in a hurry. He and his wife had cultivated a seemingly secure and respected relation with Trotsky, consolidated not only in their time at Prinkipo, but in traveling with Trotsky and Natalia Sedova to Norway in the fall of 1932. There had apparently been talk of Trotsky and Field collaborating on writing projects.¹⁶³ Settling into New York, he did indeed offer his services to the Left Opposition, and was soon again featured in the pages of *The Militant*.¹⁶⁴ By March 1933, B.J. and Esther having sought "reinstatement into the League," Field's articles were appearing weekly and, at the end of the month, he was invited to National Committee meetings, where documents he prepared were part of an extensive discussion on the economic and political perspectives of the Left Opposition.

When the ILO contacted the American League in March 1933, suggesting that the United States comrades establish a committee to collect funds to provide financial support for the Russian Oppositionists who were in prison or exiled, the National Committee proposed Field be "placed in charge of this work in recruiting a committee directly from the intellectual circles with whom he has been working." Chaired by Trotsky, the international initiative was essentially a short-lived fundraising exercise. Field lined up a number of well-known literary figures on the political left, enlisting Sidney Hook to serve as the treasurer of the American effort, formally and awkwardly designated the American Committee

not only the attacks of Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer, but a repudiation from Trotsky. See Cannon to Dunne, "Minority Maneuvers and Problems with Trotsky," October 1932, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: Writings and Speeches, 1932-1934*, 166-170; Farrell Dobbs and Sam Gordon in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 44, 72. Ironically, there was little factional disagreement about Field within the National Executive Committee. See National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 11 April 1932; 2 May 1932; 12 September 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers; *Dog Days*, 638, n. 382.

163 See John Dewey et al., eds., *The Case of Leon Trotsky: Report of Hearings on the Charges Made Against Him in the Moscow Trials - Verbatim Transcript of Trotsky's Testimony Before the Dewey Commission, Coyoacan, Mexico, April 10-17, 1937* (New York: Merit, 1968), 135, 137, 144, 147, 152, 169, 171; Breitman and Lovell, eds., *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1932]*, 393.

164 B.J. Field, "German Bourgeoisie Calls Fascism to Solve Economic Crisis Its Way," *The Militant*, 13 February 1933; Field, "Hitler Threat to Soviet Union," *The Militant*, 15 February 1933; Field, "Intensive Exploitation of the German Workers Prospect Under Hitler," *The Militant*, 27 February 1933; Field, "Roosevelt Regime Reopens Question of Russ Soviets," *The Militant*, 3 March 1933; Field, "National Banking Crisis," *The Militant*, 6 March 1933; Field, "The Banking Crisis in the United States," *The Militant*, 8 March 1933; B.J. Field, "The New US Banking Law," *The Militant*, 18 March 1933; Field, "World Economic Situation Today," *The Militant*, 25 March 1933; Field, "World Economic Situation Today," *The Militant*, 1 April 1933; Field, "Workers Must Organize Against State Capitalism," *The Militant*, 24 June 1933; Field, "Industrial Recovery Act Prepares New Capitalist Crisis in the Future," *The Militant*, 8 July 1933.

of the Commission for Help to the Imprisoned and Deported Bolsheviks (Left Opposition), colloquially known as the Friends of the October Revolution. Others loosely involved in the venture, in which Field was the secretary, included the Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera; *Modern Quarterly* editor, V.F. Calverton; and Max Eastman. The “neutral” committee, in which figures such as Waldo Frank and Edmund Wilson were also named as possible members, raised a few hundred dollars, forwarded to Trotsky in the spring of 1933. Thereafter little was heard of the venture.¹⁶⁵

Field was at work in other ways. Abern discerned the crystallization of a “Field group” inside the New York branch, although he characterized it as “the weakest excuse for a group I have ever witnessed, its political and organizational ineptness being quite distinct.” Composed of Field and his wife, another couple, and three others, this nascent faction had a discernible and flamboyant Greek component. From far afield in Turkey, Shachtman noted that Field, who was continually corresponding with Trotsky, was playing at the politics of consolidating a “neutral, objective, independent group,” one based on “two or three Hellenic stalwarts.” A future landscape painter and animated bohemian, Aristodimos Kaldis/Caldis, was undoubtedly Field’s most noteworthy recruit. Having broken from the official Communist Party in the 1920s, Kaldis edited the Greek-language Trotskyist monthly, *The Communist*, utilizing the journal to urge Greek workers to embrace the Left Opposition and fulfill Bolshevism’s original promise. Another former Communist Party member, Sebastian Pappas, expelled in October 1932 for supporting the League’s campaign to build a united front to defend the German workers’ movement from Hitler’s aggressions, complemented the consolidating Field group, aligning with another Greek activist in the hotel and restaurant sector, F. Petras. The Kaldis/Pappas duo would soon help catapult Field into prominence as a strike leader: Kaldis, whose waged work was as a waiter, had been agitating among New York kitchen workers, bell-hops, doormen, and elevator drivers, promoting the idea of industrial unionism and a possible strike in the hotel industry to achieve better working conditions and higher wages. Pappas was a seasoned activist in the Trade Union Unity League’s Food Workers Industrial Union (FWIU). Kaldis, Pappas, and Petras likely constituted a trio that Cannon referred to as the “handful of Trotskyists”

165 National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 9 March 1933; 18 March 1933; 23 March 1933; 27 March 1933; 3 April 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers; Sidney Hook, *Out of Step: An Unquiet Life in the 20th Century* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1987), 183; Christopher Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook: Marxist and Pragmatist* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 93; Leon Trotsky, “Help is Needed At Once,” in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1932–1933]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972), 121–123; *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement 1, 1929–1933*, 231–232.

who found themselves, in 1933–34, “in the midst of a swirling mass movement,” with Kaldis almost certainly the hotel worker identified as an isolated “old-time militant in the trade” suddenly finding himself “an influential figure.”¹⁶⁶

At about the same time the Fields reappeared in New York, Pappas was detailing the worsening conditions in the New York food industry, and the weakened state of the FWIU. In March 1933 a strike broke out among the cafeteria workers; it lasted two weeks and petered out without accomplishing much. But in the months to come the efforts of Kaldis, Pappas, and Benjamin Gitlow (recently split from Jay Lovestone’s Communist Party – Opposition and calling for the formation of a new communist party), brought the possibility of one big union in the New York hotel and restaurant sector closer to realization. This was a breakthrough in the largely unorganized service industry that was anything but applauded by the Stalinist leadership of the Food Workers Industrial Union. Kaldis reported in October 1933 that the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union [HRWU] a defunct dual union whose origins lay in the Industrial Workers of the World, and now a branch of the Amalgamated Food Workers Union, was going through a revival. Growing in influence, it had organized 2000 workers in 35 hotels and sponsored a packed meeting at which Cannon, Field, and Gitlow spoke. Securing formal union recognition for the lapsed HRWU, according to Kaldis, offered opportunities to extend organized labor’s reach into all sectors of the hotel industry:

Let all of us redouble our efforts and bring into the union more fellow workers in order to force our bosses to recognize our union. Thus we can

¹⁶⁶ The above two paragraphs draw on: National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 12 January 1933; 9 March 1933; 18 March 1933; 23 March 1933; 27 March 1933; 3 April 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers; Abern to Glotzer, “The Master’s Ways,” 6 July 1933, *Dog Days*, 563; Shachtman to Abern, 22 June 1933, Roll 3/Reel 3346, MS Papers; Roskolenko, *When I Was Last on Cherry Street*, 143; Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 107; A. Caldis, “Stalinists Collaborate with Clergy, Millionaires,” *The Militant*, 26 January 1933; “New Militant Forces Join the Ranks of the Left Opposition: Declaration by Pappas,” *The Militant*, 29 October 1932; Esther Field, “I.L.D. Refuses Aid to Greek Worker,” *The Militant*, 29 April 1933; A.C., “Greek Stalinists Support Bourgeois Party in Elections,” *The Militant*, 12 August 1933. F. Petras is mentioned in Sebastian Pappas, “Cafeteria Strike On in N.Y.,” *The Militant*, 18 March 1933, and he had figured in breaches of League discipline early in 1933, there being concerns he had written to a Greek sympathizer in Pittsburgh about the internal situation in the Left Opposition. See National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 5 January 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers. Cannon comment in *History of American Trotskyism*, 126. See also, Dan Georgakas, “The Greeks in America,” *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, 14 (Spring-Summer 1987), 36–37; *Labor Action*, 15 March 1934; 2 April 1934.

put a stop to the miserable wages and long hours. We can also end the humiliation that we ... are forced to undergo, not only from the guests of the hotels, but also from the militaristic commands of our head-waiters and chefs. We must always bear in mind that besides the kitchen and dining-room departments, we can also organize the other workers of the hotels who are equally exploited by our bosses, that is, chamber-maids, laundry-workers, elevator operators and the rest.

Field soon marshalled an impressive statistical arsenal, in which overbuilding in the hotel sector throughout the 1920s was shown to have culminated in escalating failure rates and rising liabilities. This was related to New York's experience of a concentration of capital and of the preeminent role of financial institutions, banks having come to own a number of important establishments. Field's data suggested the hotel sector in New York, with the largest employing units in the country, staved off a crisis of overproduction by "cutting wages, lengthening hours, and speeding up the work." He noted that waiter and waitress wages suffered a 25 percent decline, while the working week (six days) was extended from 48 to 54 hours. Against the bosses' code of low wages, long hours, and "an amazing collection of tricky provisions ... stabiliz[ing] the workers' conditions at intolerably low levels," Field posed what he called a workers' code. It stipulated a 40-hour work week; a minimum weekly wage of \$15; an end to split shifts; abolition of the spy system; and the creation of workers' committees to advocate wage adjustments mandated by rising living costs.¹⁶⁷

167 Pappas, "The Crisis in the Food Workers Industrial Union in New York," *The Militant*, 7 January 1933; Pappas, "Stalinist Policies Throw Food Workers Union into Serious Crisis," *The Militant*, 11 February 1933; Pappas, "Cafeteria Strike On in New York," *The Militant*, 18 March 1933; A Food Worker, "Opportunism in NY Food Union," *The Militant*, 5 August 1933; Pappas, "Stalinists Split Food Workers," *The Militant*, 30 September 1933; Artis. Caldis, "The Organizing Campaign of the New York Food Workers," and James Gordon, "The Food Workers' Industrial Union and the Split from the A.F.W.: A Horrible Example of Stalinist 'Third Period' Trade Union Policies," *The Militant*, 21 October 1933. The Field article is unsigned: "Situation in Hotels and Restaurants: Conditions of Workers in Large NY Industry," *The Militant*, 28 October 1933. The origins of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union, and its 1934 New York affiliation with the Amalgamated Food Workers Union, are obscure and rarely discussed in terms of Trotskyist influences. See Matthew Josephson, *Union House, Union Bar: The History of the Hotel & Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union, AFL-CIO* (New York: Random House, 1956), 138, 217–219; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 122–123. Organizing in the New York hotel and restaurant sector dates to Knights of Labor campaigns of German waiters in the 1880s, and by the second decade of the twentieth century American Federation of Labor and Industrial Workers of the World organizers competed for the allegiances of culinary workers. Wobbly-led strikes in 1912

Registering some successes among the disgruntled New York hotel workers, the Left Opposition confronted three tiers of resistance. With the budding Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union branch of the Amalgamated Food Workers threatening their FWIU, the Stalinists, who already refused to join forces with an ostensible competitor, expelled members who openly sided with the call for a new industrial union.¹⁶⁸ The big hotel owners, in turn, mobilized against the new union by developing company unions and pursuing all loopholes available through Roosevelt's labor codes in the National Recovery Act [NRA]. Finally, American Federation of Labor "guild" locals of chefs and other crafts, and most especially Local 16 of the mainstream Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union [HREU], balked at the HRWU drive. Local 16 expended only the most feeble of efforts to organize waiters in New York, and it made noises, some louder than others, that its members would work through any strikes called by the fledgling and pugnacious upstart union. Local 16's threat was rather sinister. Along with another HREU affiliate, Local 302 of cafeteria workers, it had well-known mob connections, cultivated over years of representing speakeasy workers during the Prohibition era. Officials of Locals 16 and 302 hobnobbed with the notorious Dutch Shultz, who responded to the repeal of Prohibition with an early 1930s invasion of New York's restaurants and cafeterias, seeking new sources of income in "union organizing."¹⁶⁹

The Communist League of America fought back against these initiatives as best it could, mobilizing workers in the food sector to pressure the Stalinist union bureaucracy to retreat on its policy of expulsions. Cannon spoke at a Left Opposition Forum on "The NRA and the trade unions." Field, who almost

and 1913 and a strike by an independent union of hotel and restaurant workers in 1918 involved thousands of workers but gained little. By the 1920s the legacy of these mobilizations informed the emergence of the Amalgamated Food Workers. For this tortured and tangled history see Frank Bohn, "The Strike of the New York Hotel and Restaurant Workers," *International Socialist Review*, 13 (February 1913), 621; Howard Kimeldorf, *Battling for American Labor: Wobblies, Craft Workers, and the Making of the Union Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 86–141; David Saposs, *Left-Wing Unionism: A Study of Radical Policies and Tactics* (New York: International, 1926); Jay Rubin and M.J. Obermeier, *Growth of a Union: The Life and Times of Edward Flore* (New York: Comet Press, 1943).

¹⁶⁸ For the Communist-led Food Workers Industrial Union and its sectarianism in this period see Kimeldorf, *Battling for American Labor*, 142–145.

¹⁶⁹ See Josephson, *Union House, Union Bar*, 229–233; Kimeldorf, *Battling for American Labor*, 142–143, 147; Harold Seidman, *Labor Czars: A History of Labor Racketeering* (New York: Liveright, 1938), 202–204; Rubin and Obermeier, *Growth of a Union*, 228–238. In the case of Local 302, the connection to organized crime was sealed in "sweetheart contracts" negotiated by an employers' association affiliated with mobsters.

certainly was already working closely with Kaldis was, according to Cannon, “assigned to go into the hotel situation to help our faction and to give the union the benefit of his knowledge as a statistician, an economist, and a linguist.” He demonstrated his usual accelerated ascent up the ladder of the administrative apparatus, and by October 1933 was well placed among the workers advocating unionism in the hotel and restaurant sector. A powerful contingent of French chefs, entrenched in the most prestigious hotels and restaurants, were wary of joining the rabble-rousing, Kaldis-led waiters, bus-boys, and other hotel “riff-raff.” Something of a labor aristocracy, they were nonetheless curious as to what was at stake in the increasing agitation around industrial union organizing and recognition. They were, however, limited as to what they could understand; many had trouble figuring out what was at stake in the animated discussions that often took place, not only in English, but in Greek, Italian, and other languages. They cottoned to Field immediately. His cultured demeanor was no doubt a part of the attraction, but as Cannon opined, “Our intellectual could talk French with them till the cows came home. This gave him extraordinary importance in their eyes.” Field could not have been involved in the union long, but he was soon ideally situated to take over the office of Secretary when the position became vacant because of a resignation. With the French chefs in his corner, insisting “that Field should be secretary,” the Columbia graduate and former Wall Street analyst (who had never worked a day in his life in a hotel) “was duly elected.” All of this, Cannon recalled somewhat incredulously, “before anybody knew what had happened.”

Barely having had a chance to bang his gavel down on a union meeting table, Field was appearing before the local compliance board of the NRA, protesting a ruling apparently stipulating that waiters’ gratuities from the public should alone constitute their minimum weekly wage of \$15. The new Secretary of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union was successful in having this “infamous ruling” reversed, although the NRA’s *Hotel Code* would soon turn back this victory and, to add insult to injury, seemingly institutionalize the 54-hour working week in the restaurant sector, tilting dramatically against the Amalgamated’s push to limit hours to 40. Field proceeded to launch a broadside against the NRA’s failure to protect workers in the industry from being fired for union activities and organizing. He also upped the ante, attacking the tipping system as degrading and vicious, demanding a minimum wage of \$35 for waiters. Field further warned that resentments and grievances were so widespread among hotel and restaurant workers that a general strike was imminent unless changes were forthcoming. Mass meetings informing the supporters of the nascent union about such goings on were happening twice weekly at the spacious, new Eighth Avenue headquarters of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union. Can-

non and Field were regular speakers, and the cause of the new union was given further stimulus in December 1933 when the waiters at the Hotel Montclair walked off the job demanding “\$12.50 a week, no arbitrary firing, no splitting of tips with the captains, the house to keep uniforms clean, and decent food.” It had all the trappings of a Wobbly insurrection.¹⁷⁰

The Montclair strike was seen as a harbinger of great things for the hotel and restaurant workers. A rebellious waiters’ picket line was soon bolstered by the hotel’s dining room and kitchen staff. A fiery Kaldis promised that “bell-boys, housemen, chambermaids, elevator men and women” were bringing about the ideal of industrial unionism, “aided also by the coming together of native and foreign born members.” When Kaldis was arrested, charged with organizing a gang to physically intimidate scabs, he quickly turned the tables. Convincing the recalcitrant strikebreaker who lodged a complaint with the police to withdraw his accusations, Kaldis was promptly back on the picket lines. The hotel was forced to close its dining facilities, housing strikebreakers in its own rooms lest they fraternize with the strikers and join their ranks. Hotels throughout New York City which had long refused to pay waiters wages on the grounds that gratuities were sufficient compensation, were rumored to be calling meetings with their serving staff to discuss weekly waged compensation. With the new union claiming significant advances in organizing the dining rooms of the large hotels, many of which were said to be 70–95 percent unionized, the Communist League of America threw itself whole-heartedly into the food worker battle.

Cannon, Shachtman, and Swabeck were designated a special committee to be constantly at hand in the League offices “with authority to make binding

170 The above paragraphs draw on “Stalinists Expel 3 Food Workers from Union,” and Hotel Worker, “NY Food Workers Turn to Trade Union Action,” *The Militant*, 11 November 1933; “Probation for Food Workers,” and “Open Forum: The NRA and the Trade Unions,” *The Militant*, 18 November 1933; A.C., “Mass Meeting of Food Workers Acclaims Drive for General Strike,” *The Militant*, 25 November 1933; A.C., “Hotel Union Shows Gains,” *The Militant*, 9 December 1933; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 127–128. Field would later note that both Cannon and Shachtman raised questions about him assuming the Secretary’s position within the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union when he was not, in effect, an actual working member of the union. See B.J. Field, A. Caldis, J. Carr, D. Levet, A. Russell, P. Myers, and E. Field, “Lessons of the New York Hotel Strike,” no date [April 1934], in “Communist League of America, 1932–1934, Miscellaneous Internal Materials,” Socialist Workers Party Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, documents provided by Prometheus Research Library, New York, New York. Although Cannon was described in Solon De Leon, *The American Labor Who’s Who* (New York: Hanford, 1925), 36, as a “Member hotel & Rest. Empl. Int. All. & Bartenders Int. Leg of A.” there is no evidence corroborating this designation.

decisions on the spot ... and to supervise the political direction of the work of our fraction in the union, and to further develop its program of action." On December 27 1933, the National Executive Committee of Cannon, Shachtman, Abern, Oehler, and Swabeck, with B.J. Field in attendance, drew up a program of action for the Amalgamated Food Workers Union in which it was unanimously agreed that the union demands, including recognition, were to be "gained by means of a general strike." All Left Opposition members were to be assessed for strike fund contributions, unions in New York and around the country approached for aid and support, and special arrangements made to collect monies to shore up the strikers. Publicity was to be undertaken and the exposure of the conditions of the food workers broadened. Hugo Oehler, who was an experienced worker in the sector, Jack Carmody, and other League organizers, including an Italian-speaking Left Oppositionist, were assigned full-time to the hotel and restaurant workers' crusade. Cannon's field operatives returned to New York City after months among the bona fide proletarians, the Illinois miners. "Strike the hotels," editorialized *The Militant* on 30 December 1933. With this New Year's resolution, capital and labor in the hotel and restaurant sector of the cosmopolitan metropolis of the United States squared off in preparation for a battle royal.¹⁷¹

With threat of the food workers agitation spreading to Philadelphia, New York's hotel and restaurant workers met weekly to hear Cannon, Gitlow, Field, Louis Budenz, and others "reaffirm the necessity of a general strike." *The Militant* ran a feature article detailing the deteriorating conditions of women "working in Macy's model restaurant." In a vivid description of the travails of the refined lunch trade, a "Macy Worker" outlined the cut-throat individualism, litany of disciplinary rules and draconian punishments, and the stock of petty subterfuges that the restaurant bosses utilized to keep waitresses divided, destitute, and demoralized. Oehler headed up the work of the League fraction and was diligent in building support for the new union and laying the groundwork for a general strike. This often necessitated holding back some trigger-happy militants at individual hotels who wanted to shoot the works

171 The above paragraphs draw on "New York Hotel Strikers Organize," *New York Times*, 16 December 1933; "NY Hotel Strikers Organize: Food Workers Union Strengthens Ranks," *The Militant*, 16 December 1933; AFW Worker, "Hotel Workers Driving Toward General Strike: Amalgamated Union Formulates Program of Demands," and "Editorial: Strike the Hotels," *The Militant*, 30 December 1933; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 127–128; National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 23 November 1933; and Special Meeting, 27 December 1933, "Program for the Amalgamated Food Workers Union," Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers; Myers, *The Prophet's Army*, 63–65.

in premature walkouts. Such tact was often wasted on the always overzealous Kaldis who, along with B.J. and Esther Field, was on the budding food workers' union payroll. How to build unity across the divided union jurisdictions that housed Stalinists, bureaucratized craft locals of the American Federation of Labor, and the Left Opposition-favored upstart industrial union, the HRWU, was not easy: the bosses and NRA officials often obliged only those bodies blessed by the American Federation of Labor. To add gasoline to this explosive mixture, the New York leaders of the ineffective and gangster-ridden Waiters AFL Local 16 of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union were shameless in their strikebreaking. They applied to the Superior Court of New York for an injunction "to restrain the Amalgamated Union from destroying the AFL union, or interfering with its members' employment, or picketing at places where they are employed."

Nuances separated Oehler and the National Executive Committee of the CLA, but in general the Left Opposition took the position that there needed to be one union in the entire hotel and restaurant industry. It urged the Hotel and Restaurant Workers branch of the Amalgamated Food Workers, which was growing daily and was undeniably the vanguard of the general strike movement, to invite all members of the Trade Union Unity League's Food Workers Industrial Union to join its ranks and present a common front against the hotel and restaurant bosses. Almost from the beginning, Field and Kaldis presented cracks in the wall of a Left Opposition fraction inside the hotel and restaurant workers' mobilization. Oehler reported to the National Executive Committee of the Communist League of America on 11 January 1934 that Field and Kaldis failed to take a clear position within the Amalgamated Food Workers on "the unity proposal as formulated by the NC. ... the fraction is not functioning properly. It is particularly Field and Caldís who obstruct the proper functioning of the fraction. Strikes have broken out in ... Broadway restaurants where the AFL is trying to furnish strikebreakers." At one of these nightclubs, the Casino de Paree, 60 waiters were locked out when they defied management's orders to join a scab-herding AFL local, instead casting their lot with the new industrial Amalgamated union. The split in the Left Opposition forces widened appreciably in mid-January 1934, with Field and Kaldis failing to follow through on an apparent commitment to nominate Oehler for a part-time organizer's position. They were also not contributing a portion of their union salaries, again as they had agreed, to sustain Oehler as organizer of the Left Opposition fraction. Aside from the obvious difficulties this created, Oehler reported to the National Committee that the refusal of Field and Kaldis to "carry out their duty" in the general strike preparations "led to the formation of an anti-administration group in the union, in which the Stalinites appear to have secret influence. It is necessary

now to take up this question of the attitude of Field and Caldis in the most thorough manner."¹⁷²

In spite of these difficulties, the League's fraction made headway, and a shop meeting of the Waldorf Astoria workers accepted its proposals. These workers would prove the match that ignited a 1934 explosion in New York's entertainment district, with its famed hotels and restaurants. Cannon's role in the strike was increased. The CLA's National Executive Committee moved that he was to "offer his services to the Union, in as much as he has already in several instances participated in its mass meetings, the fraction proposes that he be placed with the strike machinery in an advisory capacity, and that he work closely with the fraction in the strike leadership." With Cannon preoccupied with this work among the hotel and restaurant workers, Shachtman was to take over for him at *The Militant*, serving as editor of the paper. It was to appear three times weekly in the event of a general strike, its "main feature" to be "news of the strike, the issues of the strike, and the League policies on the strike." "Our whole organization, all over the country, was mobilized to help the New York hotel strike as task number one," Cannon later recalled, "We poured everything we had into that task to make it successful. ... We strained the organization almost to the breaking point to help that strike." Moving to neutralize Field and Kaldis, the fraction was further informed that in the event of a strike it had only consultative powers and that all decisions were to be made by the League's National Committee.¹⁷³

At this point the pent-up frustrations of the workers in the hotel sector exploded, egged on perhaps by the volatile Kaldis. When a French sous-chef employed at the Waldorf Astoria, Andre Fournigault, was discharged by the much reviled Lucius Boomer, President of the posh Park Avenue hotel and head of the bosses' Hotel and Restaurant Men's Association, the fight was on. Fournigault's dismissal for supporting the new union and its demands prompted 600 waiters, chefs, and kitchen and dining-room staff to fold their arms, consult briefly with one another, and walk out. As the talented journalist and

172 "Philadelphia Food Workers Strike: Fight Against Heavy Odds to Organize Industry," *The Militant*, 6 January 1934; "Big Meetings in Hotel Union Drive," and Macy Worker, "Working in Macy's Model Restaurant," 20 January 1934; *New York Times*, 26 January 1934, quoted in Mathewson, *Union House, Union Bar*, 217–218; National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 2 January 1934; 9 January 1934; 11 January 1934; 18 January 1932, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers. For a detailed discussion of the subterfuges in the hotel and restaurant trade that gouged workers see McAlpin Worker, "Rackets at the McAlpin," *The Militant*, 27 January 1934.

173 National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 23 January 1934; 24 January 1934, Box 35, File 10, GB Papers; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 128–129.

CLA sympathizer, Herbert Solow [Harry Strang] wrote in *The Nation*: “The Serf Room Orchestra played on as when the Lusitania sank.” The strikers established a small and temporary picket line. With placards and cheers, they headed to the Hotel and Restaurant Workers’ headquarters. A meeting was quickly convened, addressed by Field, Kaldis, and Cannon. The Waldorf walkout kick-started a general strike. The next evening 3,000 hotel and restaurant workers packed the union auditorium, adopting a strike resolution that demanded recognition of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers branch of the Amalgamated Food Workers, union scale wages, the forty hour-five day week, wages not to be taken out of tips, no split shifts, and no charges for meals, uniforms, or laundry. Field and Cannon again spoke, the latter interrupted by bursts of applause as he urged the strikers to “follow the example of the Waldorf vanguard” and pointed out that “the eyes of all labor in America were directed upon them.” “Whether it be a mine in Illinois or a Park Avenue hotel,” railed *The Militant*, “rights and conditions, recognized or not, can only be secured by organization and struggle.”¹⁷⁴

Within days mass picket lines at the Waldorf Astoria soared into the thousands. Swelled by a throng of 2,000 that marched from the union’s Eighth Avenue headquarters, the strikers were treated to periodic announcements from B.J. Field, who read from a bulletin a long list of hotels and restaurants where work had ceased as the General Strike grew. By 29 January 1934 over fifty New York hotels and eating establishments were struck, among them some of the largest and most prestigious in the city: Pennsylvania, Biltmore, New Yorker, Lexington, Astor, Ambassador, Westbury, Delmonico, St. Regis, and Taft. With 20,000 purported to be striking, and membership applications flowing into the Amalgamated faster than clerical staff could process them, the union’s large headquarters proved inadequate and a second hall, the Palm Garden, was secured. Mass meetings were chaired by Oehler, and heard Cannon, Field,

174 A number of articles appeared in the “Special Foodworkers’ Strike Number!” of *The Militant*, 27 January 1934, headlined, “Call General Strike of N.Y. Food Workers.” In one of the pieces, “The Strikers Speak,” Emil Smith, a dining room delegate at the Waldorf Astoria, addresses the walkout. For more see Herbert Solow, “The New York Hotel Strike,” *The Nation*, 138 (28 February 1934), 239–240. Solow is discussed extensively in Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, esp. 60–74, 102–112, 128–139; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 154–155. For his articles in the Trotskyist press see Harry Strang, “The Boycott of Fascist Germany: A Sympathizer Writes on the Strategy of the Anti-Hitler Struggle,” and Strang, “Boss Papers Launch Flood of Lies Against Hotel Strike,” *The Militant*, 29 January 1934 and also Solow’s attack on the Communist Party’s approach to the hotel strike in Solow, “The Daily Worker and the Hotel Strike,” *The Militant*, 10 March 1934. See also “15,000 in Hotels Ready to Strike,” *New York Times*, 25 January 1934; “Hotel Union Plans Walkout Tonight,” *New York Times*, 26 January 1934.

Kaldis and other Left Opposition organizers champion “the long-suffering hotel workers.” Cannon urged the extension of the General Strike and the necessity of closing all hotels where workers were still on the job.

Kaldis, along with the aspiring poet, Harry Roskolenko [Harry Ross], and a former CP youth leader, the physically tough future bodyguard of Trotsky in Mexico, Harold Robins, apparently took Cannon’s words to heart. According to Roskolenko, they broke into the kitchen of one “plush Park Avenue hotel” at the height of the noon lunch trade. Staffed by politically-conscious but highly individualistic Greeks, the kitchen was confronted by the trio of Trotskyists, brandishing a butcher’s knife, a meat cleaver, and a crowbar. Kaldis led the assault, appealing to his countrymen: “Out! Every son of Zeus, out like lightening! I am Kaldis, and you are disgracing Greek history – out! Proletariat-of-Greece in America, off with your black jackets! You white-hatted sons of Dionysus, out of the kitchens! If not ...” The chefs, cooks, waiters, salad men, and kitchen helpers then joined the strike, leaving the kitchen empty and smoke-filled, the charred remains of lunches not served still burning on the stoves. With the mainstream press reporting that a fearless crew of Greek “gangsters” were visiting working hotels and intimidating the staff, Roskolenko claimed “we had dozens of gently-maddened Greeks entering our Trotskyist ranks.”

“Diana Rice” wrote of a Cannon speech, in which the impassioned Left Opposition leader outlined the characteristics of the new hotel unionism. Cannon presented the service sector labor upheaval as a “racial and religious and political democracy.” He extolled its “solidarity” and “the grand principle of industrial unionism which brings together in one solid fighting mass the workers in every shop, every kind of worker from the most skilled down to the least skilled, all workers together, backing each other and going on to victory together.” The highlight of the evening according to this correspondent, Cannon’s rousing address was one of the planks in the growing General Strike movement, launched as a means of insuring the right of workers in the hotel and restaurant industry to “live like men and women instead of like slaves.”

As January wound to a close, the General Strike continued to grow. This was in spite of a plethora of opposing forces. Police intimidated picketers. Conservative newspapers offered up pages of misinformation. Hotel management employed armed thugs to disrupt picket lines, and AFL guilds of waiters, chefs, and other trades sent their members to scab on the strike through the auspices of “employment agencies.” Stalinists did their utmost to dissuade workers from flocking to the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union, their FWIU posed as a barrier against HRWU growth. Yet thousands of strikers took over Park Avenue as Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt allowed himself to be fêted. His birthday dinners at hotels run by scab labor served as a symbolic

reminder of how little the strikers could expect from the National Recovery Act's ostensible guarantee of collective bargaining rights. Leading the march was B.J. Field who told the press that, "This is not just a demonstration of strength, or simply a protest against the President's attitude. It is a call to battle, which will have its answer tomorrow when hundreds of additional workers will join our ranks." The momentous month ended on a high note as 10,000 strikers packed Madison Square Gardens to hear B.J. Field, radical journalist Heywood Broun, A.J. Muste, Wobbly poet Arturo Giovannitti, Gitlow, and Cannon urge the strikers on to victory, their speeches broadcast over the radio. "Extend the hotel strike to all food workers," Cannon thundered. "Our motto is class solidarity. Our goal is: those who do not work shall not eat!" The strike ranks were now said to exceed 30,000, although this was likely an exaggeration and the mainstream press would soon go on the offensive in an effort to present the strike as flagging.¹⁷⁵

As a strike among cab drivers erupted in February 1934, crippling the industry and tying up most of the large companies, threatening to extend to tens of thousands of taxi operators, there was no question that the class struggle in New York was reaching boiling point. Behind the scenes, Cannon and the Communist League of America grasped what was perhaps far from obvious to most other observers. A 2 February 1934 editorial in *The Militant* concentrated on the need for the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union's leadership to pursue a militant, class struggle course: "The class struggle policy is the only way to keep up the ranks of the strikers and to add to them. ... Our support will go, as it always

¹⁷⁵ The above paragraphs draw on "Diana Rice," "Thousands Surround Waldorf in First Mass Picketing Line"; "Struck Hotels"; "20,000 Out"; "Service Crippled as Strike Ranks Swell"; and "Boss Papers Launch Flood of Lies Against Hotel Strikes," all in *The Militant*, 29 January 1934; "Revolt at Local 16's Treachery: Members of AFL Refuse to Act as Scabs"; "FWIU 'Fortress' Collapses: New Yorker Men Vote Solid for Amalgamated"; "Draw Guns on Pickets: Police Effort to Scare Workers is Defied"; "Face Thugs at Longchamps"; "Strikers 'Greet' Roosevelt Scab Birthday Dinner"; "10,000 Fill Mass Rally: Madison Square Gardens Jammed with Strikers," all in *The Militant*, 31 January 1934; "Daily Worker Hits Hotel Strike with Slander and False Charges"; "Boss Press Persists in Fighting Strike"; "Scabs a Flop at Casino de Paree," *The Militant*, 2 February 1934; Roskolenko, *When I Was Last On Cherry Street*, 143–144; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 129–130. For an undated one-page speech outline that could well have represented Cannon's remarks in January 1934 food workers meetings, see James P. Cannon, "Food Workers Meeting 1934," Reel 34, JPC Papers. The outline accents the necessity of organizing and building trade unionism; relying on workers' strengths rather than state agencies; the ways in which working-class organization builds collectivity and strengthens resolve to be human beings rather than exploited labor; and details needs of shorter hours, better wages, and more life. On the conventional media's representation of the strike's flagging trajectory in this period see "Hotel Strike Over, Executives Declare," *New York Times*, 1 February 1934.

has gone, to those elements who show their colors in the fight, and to none others." Advocating consolidating the strikers and integrating them into the union, attracting new forces to the Amalgamated-affiliated HRWU and educating the ranks with daily strike meetings, Cannon and the League campaigned publicly to inspire the hotel and restaurant strikers "with the feeling of class solidarity, with a reliance upon their own strength, their own power, their own invincibility." All of this would steel the strikers against any inclination to "crawl before the bosses or the bosses' press." There was a need to tighten up the functioning of the strike, to coordinate its activities through responsible committees and to draw the workers more and more into the union, building their morale through militant leadership. It was also acknowledged that militancy alone could not achieve miracles, and that a judicious sense of what it was possible to win was crucial to success: "The demands which the workers can gain are determined by what the situation makes possible to attain. It is not out of the question that the situation may call, for the time being, for a compromise settlement, which it will not be to the dishonor of the workers to accept. An honest leadership worthy of the name will have no need of being ashamed to organize its ranks even for such an outcome if the conditions impose it upon the workers."

This was the public face of the Left Opposition's union fraction, but inside the leading bodies of the League, Cannon and others worried about the "disorganized" state of "the strike machinery." Union officials and CLA members B.J. Field and Aristodimos Kaldis were now in open, rebellious defiance of Cannon, Oehler, and the Left Opposition fraction. Field and Kaldis publicly attacked the League's leadership of the picketing committee and failed to respond to the growing influence of the Stalinists, who demanded a merger of leaderships of the two contending unions involved in the strike. Faced with "reactionary, flag-waving" and the scapegoating criticism of the Stalinists, Field and Kaldis, according to Cannon, were refusing to take a principled stand, opting instead to either "ignore the Stalinists or to trail behind the flag-wavers." Field was now balking at any collaboration with Cannon and Oehler as part of a National Executive steering committee of the League's fraction inside the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union, claiming that "he would not function with the steering committee and that he could neither bring forward nor defend the actions of an outside body before the Union." Ironically, Field would later criticize Cannon for failing to speak decisively within the union, Cannon claiming that he was an observer and advisor within strike meetings, rather than a component of the union leadership. Cannon and others in the Left Opposition also found many of Field's public statements and interviews with bourgeois newspapers increasingly troubling. It was a bit of the Gerry Allard syndrome

all over again, only this time it was happening in the midst of a massive class struggle that the Left Opposition had done a great deal to orchestrate and move towards an impressive General Strike. Field's colors were coming to the fore and, without naming him, *The Militant* directed fire at what Cannon, Oehler, Shachtman and others feared was a tendency to temporize and backtrack, to accommodate reactionary ideas and to cultivate illusions that the union drive in the hotel and restaurant sector could be made respectable by reasoned discussion with government and municipal authorities. League meetings were called in support of the New York strike, with Shachtman speaking, and the Waldorf Astoria continued to be the site of mass pickets of strikers, their wives and children, and supporters. Special strike editions of *The Militant* were selling well at the strikers' halls, about 1500 copies being bought by the hotel and restaurant workers, with articles clipped from the pages and posted on the union's walls. The National Executive Committee resolved to "enforce the League discipline of its members" and to make it "emphatically clear to all comrades that they are to function under the NC steering committee and be responsible to the League." Fraction meetings were to be regularized and "complete collaboration between the National Committee and all of the comrades of the fraction including those who are Union officials" demanded. Given the important role of Field and Kaldis, this meant that all organizational proposals involving the strike, including its settlement, could be "entered into only after agreement and approval of the N.C. steering committee."¹⁷⁶

Field responded to this pressure by demanding that Kaldis be added to the National Executive steering committee of Cannon, Oehler, and himself. This was agreed to, the decision calling forth the addition to this decision-making body of another League organizer, James Gordon, a former activist in the Food Workers Industrial Union who was prominent in coordinating the strike's picket activities. Field and Kaldis simply refused to participate in the reconfigured committee. With *The Militant* editorializing that the strike was

¹⁷⁶ The above paragraphs draw upon National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 1 February 1934, Box 32, Folder 10, GB Papers; "Editorial"; "Brand Lies on Union Contracts: Show Complete List of Amalgamated Demands"; "'Daily Worker' Hits Hotel Strike with Slander and Lies"; "Boss Press Persists in Fighting Strike"; "What Amalgamated Stands For"; "Mass Meeting in Support of the Hotel Strike"; "Strike Has Cut Menus to Bone"; "The Wrecking Crew at Work," all in *The Militant*, 2 February 1934; "Editorial"; "Cab Drivers in Huge Meet at Garden" and "Latest Developments in the New York Hotel Strike," *The Militant*, 10 February 1934; "Strikers 'Take' Militant," *The Militant*, 17 February 1934. Field's criticisms of Cannon appear in Field et al., "Lessons of the New York Hotel Strike," no date [April 1934] and for Cannon's increasingly hardening views on Field and Kaldis see Cannon, Speech notes, "Field-Caldis Summary," 11 February 1934, Box 28/Reel 34, JPC Papers.

at a crossroads, with a “magnificent union in the making,” but threatened by organizational inefficiency and a leadership that was failing to sustain the militant stand of the original walkout, the Left Opposition issued its first public criticism of B.J. Field on 10 February 1934.

It was suggested that Field pandered too much to NRA officials and bourgeois opinion. “Some of the publicity issued by the union is little more than scandalous,” declared the Communist League of America paper unambiguously, singling out for particular criticism the claim that the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union had too many respectable American citizens among its ranks to “possibly be considered a ‘red union.’” As the Amalgamated union’s “most prominent official,” Field was pilloried for the failure to “repudiate some of the statements which the capitalist press has attributed to him.” Acknowledging that the League constituted “only a minority in the ranks of the Amalgamated,” *The Militant* nonetheless insisted that its calls for “improvements in the organization and direction of the strike” were essential prerequisites if the “superb spirit, flawless solidarity, and gratifying militancy” of the strikers were to be rewarded with victory. It vowed to “co-operate with all progressive and militant forces in the union” willing to march in the right direction, noting that a “labor strike is the last place in which a faction monopoly or clique tendencies can be permitted.”

At a 7 February 1934 National Executive Committee meeting the discussion of the food workers’ strike revealed the private fears now harbored by Cannon and others. The hotel and restaurant struggle was trending in the wrong direction, and Left Opposition forces understood all too well that divisions within their ranks had the potential to adversely affect the union and its battle:

Reports by Cannon and Oehler brought out the fact that the strike being in constant decline with some breaks in the ranks beginning and disorganization increasing. Further open attacks on the picket committee have been made by Caldis indirectly supported by Field. All authority is taken away from the picket committee chairman (Gordon). Comrade Field finally agreed to discuss the internal strike situation with Cannon. The greatest danger is that reactionaries in the Union will gain by their exploiting of charges that political groups of communists are quarrelling among themselves.

Discussion of this situation resulted in final formulations of the following motions:

1. To attempt if at all possible to effect a temporary compromise with Field on the basis of all disputes to be taken to the NC steering committee.

2. To prefer charges against Caldis for his open attacks on the League and League members in the Union inciting the syndicalist elements against them
3. Gordon is not to raise the issue of the attack upon the picket committee in the meetings of the general strike committee but he is to make a declaration that despite all authority being taken away from him as a chairman of the picket committee, despite the complete failure of support for the picket committee from the Union officials, he will in the interest of the strike remain at his post and carry on the best way possible that the circumstances permit.

It was, as *The Militant* stated bluntly, clearly a matter of leadership.¹⁷⁷

Cannon drew up a long list of Field's transgressions and presented to Communist League of America members an explanation of how they harmed the League, compromised the strike, and undermined the hotel and restaurant workers' bid for unionization. He laid squarely at Field's feet responsibility for failing to function as a loyal CLA member, cultivating the politics of cliquism that inevitably isolated the League, conspiring with Benjamin Gitlow and others, and refusing to work collaboratively with Left Opposition comrades. Cannon charged Field with letting both NRA officials and the Stalinists "off the hook," thereby failing to educate workers and League members, disorganizing the collective leadership of the strike.¹⁷⁸

Field, unrepentant and uninterested in explaining his actions to his comrades, was tried and expelled from the Communist League of America along with his ally Kaldis. The final trial announcement took place on a Sunday afternoon, 18 February 1934. Three membership meetings of the Left Opposition in New York were devoted to a discussion of Field's and Kaldis's behavior during the hotel strike, with almost the entire League participating. Disdainful of the Left Opposition that had actually helped to place him in the leadership position that he occupied, Field was now disparaging of Trotskyism's small numbers and lack of influence in significant corridors of power. He could not even bother

¹⁷⁷ "Editorial," *The Militant*, 10 February 1934; National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 7 February 1934, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers. There is brief discussion of the deteriorating relations of Field and the Left Opposition in Myers, *The Prophet's Army*, 64–65.

¹⁷⁸ James P. Cannon, "Field group – Internal – 1934," and Cannon, "Field-Caldis Summary," 11 February 1934, Box 28/Reel 34, JPC Papers. Field responded to these allegations with a lengthy letter to William Krehm in Montreal, Canada, and a letter to Trotsky, Field to Trotsky, 25 February 1934; Field to Krehm, 4 March 1934, Roll 3, Reel 3346, MS Papers. This correspondence claimed that Cannon and Company were sabotaging the hotel workers' strike by brokering deals with Stalinists and Lovestoneites behind the back of the union leadership.

to attend his expulsion trial, sending some of his small group, who protested arrogantly that they could not be disciplined by the Left Opposition: "You can't expel us. You are only expelling yourselves from the trade union mass movement." Cannon recalled how Field moved further and further from a politics of class struggle:

Each day that went by, our heedless intellectual pulled further away from us. We tried hard, in the most comradely way, in the most humble way, to convince this swell-headed fool that he was leading not only himself but the strike to destruction, and was threatening to bring discredit on our movement. We begged him to consult us, to come and talk to the National Committee about the policy of the strike, which was beginning to sag because it was being directed wrongly. Instead of organizing the militancy of the ranks from below, and thus coming to the negotiations with a power behind him ... he was moderating the militancy of the masses and spending all his time running around from one conference to another with these government sharks, politicians, and labor skates who had no other purpose except to knife the strike.

The Field forces replied with a self-serving 11-page post-mortem on "The Lessons of the Hotel Strike" as well as statements on the expulsions of Field and Kaldis. These remarkable documents denounced Cannon and the CLA as inconsequential sectarians unable to intervene in mass struggles; their characterizations of League failures to support the hotel workers strike were often wildly at odds with even the published pages of the *Militant*, which recorded a quite different historical record of endorsement and effort.

With Field and Kaldis now out of the Communist League of America, there was little of the kind of resolve called for by Cannon and others evident in the HRWU's activities. All seemed concentrated on attempting to wind down the strike in mid-February 1934. Field, negotiating a settlement through meetings with New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, and NRA Regional Labor Board Acting Chairman, Elinore M. Herrick, secured an agreement long on promise and short on material considerations. Strike breakers were to be discharged. Strikers were to be put back on the job *if the hotel business warranted*, the only constraint being that establishments that claimed they could not rehire strikers because of a lack of trade were not allowed to employ any new staff until all of those who walked out were taken back. The Regional Labor Board would establish hearings within two weeks of the return to work in which wages, hours, and other conditions in the hotel and restaurant industry would be discussed with the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union presenting the case for

the organized workers. There was no clear-cut recognition of the collective bargaining rights of the Amalgamated union. Nothing had been achieved on the wages/hours front save for a promise from a body, the NRA, which had functioned throughout the strike as little more than an antagonist of the strikers.

Yet Field signed off on this agreement on 15 February 1934, ramming its acceptance through at a meeting of the increasingly dejected strikers. To add insult to injury, the Hotel and Restaurant Men's Association reneged on the agreement, as individual hotels refused to take back their striking employees and many of the industry bosses held out for a notorious "merit clause," through which active militants in the recent struggle could be blacklisted. Some of the hotels that previously dealt with unionized wait and kitchen staff now refused to do so. Cannon and Oehler considered the agreement nothing more than a cowardly capitulation and, all recognition of the uphill nature of the fight waged by the amalgamated union and its militant ranks aside, laid the causes of the defeat squarely at the feet of Field and Kaldis. Their demoralizing descent into conservatism and bureaucratic quick fixes, combined with "clique methods" and break with the Communist League of America insured that they led the union down the path of retreat, with the main objectives of the struggle unattained. Even as the General Strike was forced back into being by the bosses' refusal to abide by the conditions of the NRA-La Guardia orchestrated pact, the strike's staying power was broken.¹⁷⁹

179 The above paragraphs draw on "Hotel Strike Ends; Mediation is Voted," *New York Times*, 16 February 1934; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 130–135; Cannon, "Our Party's Answer to the Prosecution," 11 October 1941, in Evans, ed., *The Socialist Workers Party in World War II*, 181–182; National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 15 February 1934; 19 February 1934; 21 March 1934, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; "Hotel Strike," *The Militant*, 17 February 1934; "NRA Attacks Hotel Strike: Need Militant Policy to Overcome Crisis in Ranks," *The Militant*, 24 February 1934; "Expulsion of B.J. Field and A. Kaldis," *The Militant*, 17 March 1934; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 123. On the Field group's response see the following documents: Field et al., "The Lessons of the New York Hotel Strike," no date [April 1934]; "Statement by Comrades Field and Kaldis on their Expulsion," 19 February 1934; and Allan Russell, David Levett, Jim Carr, Esther Field, and Perry Meyers, "Statement on the Expulsion of Comrades Field and Kaldis," no date [February 1934]. These documents, in a file headed "Communist League of America, 1932–1934, Miscellaneous Internal Materials," were from the Socialist Workers Party Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, and were provided by the Prometheus Research Library, New York, New York. The Field group's documents are an unrepentant defense of Field's activities, some of which shed light on the strike and its unravelling. In their often questionable attacks on Cannon and the Communist League of America and in their refusal to engage with Field's often dubious endeavors, however, the documents are not a reliable guide to the strike's history and meanings. Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 65, cites the Field documents to claim both the advances

Kaldis may have “ate and drank on the house in the kitchens of unionized hotel workers,” as Roskolenko later wrote, and Field seemed to enjoy arguing the food workers’ case before New York officialdom and Washington committees, but the 1934 strike, which had commenced with such bravado and militant solidarity, was not won. Militancy and morale was broken by the useless agreement of mid-February 1934. It became a race to see who could finish off, not only the strike, but the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union, with the government stooges of the NRA, the guild locals of the American Federation of Labor, and the Stalinists at the head of the Food Workers Industrial Union running neck and neck.

Cannon, Oehler, and the Left Opposition did what could be done to pick up the pieces. They argued in the pages of *The Militant* and in public meetings that the industrial union representing New York’s hotel and restaurant workers could be rebuilt. Concrete proposals were made. It was necessary to organize relief for those still pounding the pavement outside of the increasing numbers of hotels and restaurants staffed with scabs. Picket lines, and mass meetings, and demonstrations of protest had to be revived. Above all, the charade of appeals to Mrs. Herrick’s obviously unsympathetic NRA Labor Board must end. To Field and Kaldis, Cannon and the League issued a blunt ultimatum: “[C]onvince the strikers by deeds that you conceive of the strike as a class battle and lead it accordingly. Stop your treacherous maneuvers and intrigues against the militants in the union and give up the idea that you can silence them with strong arm tactics. Remember this is a progressive and democratic union, not a reactionary bureaucratic one; it is the A.F.W. not the A.F. of L. Therefore try to act like progressive and militant labor leaders, not like bulldozing labor fakers.”¹⁸⁰

made in the hotel workers strike, which was true enough, and the victory of the strikers, which was, unfortunately, a Field fiction. Field and Kaldis communicated with Trotsky, trying to enlist him in their criticisms of the CLA, to no avail. Kaldis clearly had connections with a Comrade Witte, arguably one of the leading members of the Greek section of the Trotsky-led International Communist League (Bolshevik-Leninists) and also a member of that body’s International Secretariat, with whom Trotsky had a series of sharp disagreements in 1933–34. See, for instance, *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1933–1934]*, 71, 100, 127–128, 279–284; *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement 11, 1934–1940*, 462–463.

¹⁸⁰ Roskolenko, *When I Was Last On Cherry Street*, 144; “NRA Attacks Hotel Strike,” *The Militant*, 24 February 1934; “End of the New York Hotel Strike: Left Wing Fights to Rebuild Amalgamated Union,” *The Militant*, 10 March 1934; “Youth Support Hotel Strike,” *Young Spartacus*, March 1934.

It was not exactly to no avail. The indefatigable Oehler managed to revive the delegate meetings that had fallen out of favor and that brought representatives from the struck hotels and restaurants together. He was elected Chairman of the reconvened strike committee over the objections of Field, whose support in what remained of the Amalgamated union was dwindling amidst rumors that he was trying to broker affiliation of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union with the much-reviled American Federation of Labor. If Oehler, James Gordon, and others aligned with the left-wing of the Amalgamated could defeat Field inside union meetings, he remained dogged in his disingenuousness, and both the Stalinists and Lovestoneites were resuscitated as they circled the remains of the industrial union. Field's rebuke was complete in early March 1934. The Amalgamated's Executive Board dismissed Kaldis as an organizer, rejected a report by Field on the conduct of the strike, and passed a vote of non-confidence in the Secretary, whose days as a trade union leader were clearly numbered. With the Stalinist Food Workers Industrial Union still pressing merger, and the strikers effectively but treacherously led back to work in a final arrangement negotiated through a committee chaired by former New York municipal judge and stalwart Socialist Party right-winger, Jacob Panken, the Hotel and Restaurant Workers branch of the Amalgamated Food Workers was all but finished. Oehler, penniless after his weeks of barely remunerated strike organizing, begged off his Left Opposition assignment to seek paid employment. Those strikers who managed to find their way back to work faced hotel bosses emboldened in the practices of discrimination and determined to break the industrial union that had so decisively refused to bow and cringe before the autocratic commands of master chefs, waiter captains, and *maitre'd's*. By the end of March, Field, Kaldis, and their supporters had been kicked out of their Amalgamated union positions, with Field physically resisting his removal at an Executive Board meeting, leading to an acrimonious fight and appointment of a committee to take charge of the affairs of what remained of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union. Field did his best to insure that this was not very much. Assailing Stalinist hooliganism, and the cowardly acquiescence of what he now labeled "the Cannon-Shachtman group" at the CLA's helm, he absconded with the records of the organization, his loyal French chefs in tow. They banded together in a "Brotherhood of Culinary Workers," a guild endorsed by the most right-wing elements of the old, and now disintegrating, industrial union. Field was denounced in *The Militant*: "Besides adding to the demoralization of the hotel workers and weakening the struggle to rebuild their organization, the splitting maneuver of Field is a reactionary step away from the principle of industrial unionism represented by the Amalgamated." The Hotel and Restaurant Workers branch of the Amalgamated Food Workers Union was

now irrevocably divided and effectively conquered. What was left of it was now firmly under the control of the TUUL's Food Workers Industrial Union.¹⁸¹

8 Dawn of a New Left Opposition Day

Trotsky was wrong about B.J. Field. Not only had his short-lived reintegration into the Communist League of America proven disruptive, he led the hotel and restaurant workers first, to the slaughter and, second, for those who survived, into the arms of the Stalinists. Anything but neutralized, Field united with the Benjamin Gitlow-led Workers Communist League to launch an Organizing Committee for a Revolutionary Workers Party. Gitlow, a former Lovestoneite, exhibited little stomach for a long-term alliance with Field and soon departed with his group to enter the Socialist Party of America. The remnants of this Field-Gitlow organization became the League for a Revolutionary Workers Party [LRWP]. Field flirted briefly with the mercurial Weisbord, whom Trotsky finally closed the revolutionary book on in 1934. The former Wall Street economist talked with other groupings as well, but little resulted from such initiatives and the proposed Weisbord-Field alliance came to nothing. Field concluded sourly that Weisbord and his followers could not be aligned with: "it is impossible to see how such a group with such policies and leadership can contribute anything toward building a genuine revolutionary International."

Never much of a factor in the United States, Field's League did capitalize on discontents within the Canadian locals of the Communist League of America, where a precocious William Krehm chaffed against the high-handedness of Maurice Spector's leadership of the Left Opposition forces. Krehm bolted the CLA in April 1934, taking with him a group of supporters in Toronto and Montreal. They became the backbone of Field's "international" organization. But Field was not the kind of person to lead a revolutionary regroupment through both the thick and the thin. It was not long before he was expelled from

181 "End of the New York Hotel Strike," and Solow, "The Daily Worker and the Hotel Strike," *The Militant*, 10 March 1934; "Attempts to Split the Amalgamated Hotel Workers," *The Militant*, 31 March 1934; Field et al., "The Lessons of the New York Hotel Strike," no date [April 1934]; National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 26 February 1934; 8 March 1934; 21 March 1934, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers. The Amalgamated union's motion of non-confidence in the strike leadership of Field was introduced by CLAEr James Gordon and received an overwhelming vote of 12–2. See also Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 123; Josephson, *Union House*, *Union Bar*, 218; Morris A. Horowitz, *The New York Hotel Industry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 21–28, 243; Rubin and Obermeier, *Growth of a Union*.

his own organization and by the end of 1940 Field disappeared from left-wing politics, apparently attracted to the possibilities of the California real estate market.¹⁸²

Trotsky's hopes that Field might benefit the Communist League of America's recruitment of Marxist intellectuals also came to naught. Indeed, it was partly in seeing how Field was squandering the opportunities presented in the hotel workers' strike, contrasting this with the consistent articulation of militant policies by Cannon and others, that Herbert Solow and a contingent of dissident intellectuals were won to Trotskyism and broke from Stalinism in 1933–34. So well-known is the attraction of intellectuals to the Communist Party's post-1935 Popular Front that the critique of Stalinism by an important cohort of writers towards the end of the Third Period has been somewhat overshadowed. Solow, as Alan Wald has shown, was an important catalyst in this process. He figured centrally in the publication of an Open Letter written by 25 (the claim is sometimes made that 27 were involved) left-wing intellectuals to the Communist Party and the *New Masses*, protesting the Stalinist disruption of a

182 On Field and his evolution see Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 107; Jacobs, *Is Curly Jewish?* 77–103; Max Shachtman, "New Group for a 'New Party': The Gitlow Group and the Field Clique Form a 'Principled Bloc,'" *The Militant*, 26 May 1934; Shachtman, "Footnote for Historians," *New Internationalist*, 4 (December 1938), 377–378; Daniel Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 154–155; O Neal and Werner, *American Communism*, 217; Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985*, 773–774; Glotzer, *Trotsky: Memoir & Critique*, 188–190; CLA, National Executive Committee, Minutes, 29 May 1934, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; Palmer, "Maurice Spector, James P. Cannon, and the Origins of Canadian Trotskyism," 133–134, 141; "The Trotskyist Movement in Canada, 1929–1939," *Socialist History Project*, <http://www.socialisthistory.ca/Docs/History/Trotskyism-1930s.htm>, accessed 11 November 2010. The activities of the LRWP in Canada, long recognized as far more distinguished than the Field group's record in the United States, have recently been thoroughly researched by Tyler Wentzell, whose forthcoming manuscript, "Comrades and Scoundrels: William Krehm, the International Anti-Stalinist Left, and the Spanish Revolution," I have benefitted from reading. Krehm, the leading figure among the Canadian Fieldites, first met Field while a teenager in New York and a member of the Communist League of America (Opposition). He was impressed with Field, and they consolidated something of a relationship before Field was first expelled from the League in May 1932. Krehm then sided with Field in the aftermath of the 1934 hotel strike, this affiliation no doubt influenced by Field's pre-strike discussions with Krehm about the unhealthy internal state of the League (the Cannon-Shachtman divide), which Krehm would have linked to his growing disillusionment with Spector's leadership in Toronto. In 1934 Krehm was of the view that the Cannon-Shachtman-led CLA was wrong to expel Field. Krehm is also the subject of a lengthy, multi-part interview: Tom Reid interview with William Krehm, Toronto, August – December 1995, which will eventually be deposited in the Oral History Section of the Robert S. Kenny Collection, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada.

Socialist Party/trade union rally at Madison Square Gardens. Called to support and defend Austrian workers against Nazi aggression, the protest meeting drew 22,000 to the New York landmark. Instead of an orderly procession of speakers, those in attendance were treated to a display of Communist Party-orchestrated thuggery. With an agreed-upon chant emanating from the crowd, Party leader Clarence Hathaway attempted to mount the platform and seize the right to address the large audience. When he was resisted by the organizers of the meeting, chairs were flung from the balcony and fistfights erupted throughout the crowd. *The Militant* immediately denounced the Stalinist disruption, equivalents of which Left Opposition members had experienced for more than four years, this gangsterism reappearing with more regularity as Trotskyists called for the need to build a new revolutionary party and a new Communist International. Left Oppositionists thus applauded what their newspaper headlined, "The Intellectual Revolt Against Stalinist Hooliganism." The signatories to the Open Letter included John Dos Passos, Elliot Cohen, George Novack, Diana Rubin, and James Rorty, all active sympathizers and intellectual workers in various Communist Party-controlled committees and labor defense initiatives. They concluded that a united front of all who supported labor was desperately necessary, citing passages from the *Daily Worker* to sustain their position that those who divided workers only aided fascism and weakened the struggle of those resisting barbarism in Austria. "We who write this letter watch with sympathy the struggles of militant labor and aid such struggles. ... And it is with horror that we see the Communist Party play the part against which it itself has warned."

It was surely not accidental that this decisive criticism, so congruent with Left Opposition calls for the urgency of united front work in the early-to-mid 1930s, was raised at precisely the moment that the CLA was playing such an active role in the hotel strike. Pundits, poets and playwrights mingled with militant waiters and hard-nosed League organizers on Broadway picket lines and Lower East Side marches. Solow, for instance, condemned the *Daily Worker* for attacking the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union battle. He noted how the Communist Party's personal assault on his own writings on the strike in *The Nation*, as well as its attacks on everyone from Cannon to Field to La Guardia and Herrick, merely conformed to "the good old C.P. habit of seeing everything outside its ranks as one reactionary mass." The radical journalist also pointed out that he, Cannon, and *The Militant* hardly played the same role as Field, who had misled the strike and could not be convinced to reorganize the procedures of relief provisioning and other crucial matters effectively. This process of political differentiation, in which Solow recognized that there were those who "wanted the strike to be won," while the Communist Party appeared more inter-

ested in seeing the hotel and restaurant workers lose so that “it could denounce somebody,” was clearly deepening and drawing increasing recognition from left-wing intellectuals in the first months of 1934.

Two of the signatories of the “Open Letter,” Diana Rubin and Elinor Rice, are suggestive of the intellectual openness to Trotskyist ideas in this period. The movement away from Third Period Stalinism was definitely influenced by the hotel workers’ strike. Rubin, the wife of literary critic Lionel Trilling, and Rice, married to the Marxist philosopher and Communist League of America recruit, George Novack, were close friends. They almost certainly comprised the collaborative partnership that authored a lengthy article on the mass pickets at the Waldorf Astoria for the Left Opposition press under the pseudonym “Diana Rice.” Many of the intellectuals attracted to the Communist League of America or other non-Stalinist Marxist organizations, like A.J. Muste’s recently-formed American Workers Party (AWP), were searching for answers to the questions that had been raised by the Communist Party’s Third Period sectarianism, violence against other leftists, and ineffectiveness. They undoubtedly found some as they rubbed shoulders with militant workers, talked about conditions in the hotel sector, and discussed the necessity of building united fronts that could actually do something to improve laboring conditions in America and support the struggle against fascism in Europe. *The Militant* thus hailed the authors of the Open Letter for writing what “must be endorsed by every enemy of Fascism,” suggesting that the document constituted “evidence of a new attitude among the intellectuals who in recent years have gathered on the periphery of the revolutionary movement.” In future issues it ran articles by “A Signer of the Open Letter” (possibly but not necessarily Solow) that addressed “Communism and the Intellectuals,” raising pointed questions about how an alliance of workers and intellectuals might be built and addressing sharply what it meant to accept the approach of the Communist Party.¹⁸³

183 On intellectuals and the Popular Front contrast Denning, *The Cultural Front*, and Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, esp. 27–106, which relates directly to the developments which culminated in the Open Letter, as well as the Communist Party response, which was predictably denunciatory. Also useful is George Novack, “Radical Intellectuals in the 1930s,” *International Socialist Review*, 29 (March – April 1968), 21–34. Two other studies also address the non-Stalinist intellectual left in this period, but neither has the sensitivity to Trotskyism’s influence that animates Wald’s earlier book. See Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and Its Circle, 1934–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), esp. 108, which notes the friendship of Rubin and Rice; and Judy Kutulas, *The Long War: The Intellectual People’s Front and Anti-Stalinism, 1930–1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995). This paragraph draws on Diana Rice, “Thousands Surround Waldorf in First Mass Picketing Line,” *The Militant*, 29 January 1934; “C.P. Disrupts Garden

In the last instalment of this two-part discussion it was suggested that intellectuals had a particular role to play in the ongoing struggle, especially with respect to mass organizations of workers' defense that needed to be rebuilt in the sorry aftermath of Stalinism's Third Period wreckage. Working in such bodies, intellectuals would receive a material education in class struggle, as well as guidance through the mine-fields of revolutionary politics. Intellectuals had the capacity to contribute and to advance to the point that they themselves could develop, if they had the inclination, into leaders in the revolutionary movement. But the urgent and immediate necessity was to build such mass organizations and to work effectively within them. "A Signer of the Open Letter" insisted that, "Today the working-class movement is hamstrung because no such organizations exist. ... Yesterday such organizations as ... the I.L.D. [and] the League Against War and Fascism were parodies of 'united front' mass organizations. Under the impact of recent events they lie today in ruins." In the face of the tremendous challenges and threats facing workers, such as defense of class war victims, aid to strikers and their families, and the fight against war and fascism, mass organizations that could "enlist the forces necessary for militant and successful broad struggles" were "the most imperative need of the working-class." They alone, as well, could provide "the road to a new party and a revolutionary future."¹⁸⁴

Just before, during, and immediately after the hotel strike small steps in this direction were taken by Cannon, Rose Karsner, Solow, and others, who laid the foundations of the Non-Partisan Labor Defense. It originated in tandem with efforts to defend Antonio Bellussi, a follower of Cannon's old anarchist friend, Carlo Tresca. An anti-fascist threatened with deportation to Italy (where he would have faced certain imprisonment, torture, and possibly death), Bellussi ran afoul of federal agents who detained him when he tried to verbally disrupt an open-air fascist rally in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, featuring "General" Art

Meet," *The Militant*, 17 February 1934; Solow, "The Daily Worker and the Hotel Strike," and "Aftermath of the Madison Square Garden Affair: The Intellectual Revolt of Stalinist Hooliganism," *The Militant*, 10 March 1934; "Communism and the Intellectuals: 1. Toward an Alliance of the Workers and Intellectuals," *The Militant*, 17 March 1934; "Communism and the Intellectuals: 2. A Program for the Intellectuals," *The Militant*, 24 March 1934. For instances of Stalinist hooliganism directed against the Left Opposition in this period see "Gangster Attack on Chicago League Meet: Stalinist Hoodlums Repulsed as Swabeck Speaks for New Party and New International," *The Militant*, 28 October 1933; "Hooliganism Spreads to Brooklyn," *The Militant*, 23 December 1933; "Vandals Wreck League Hall," *The Militant*, 30 December 1933.

184 "Communism and the Intellectuals: 2. A Program for the Intellectuals," *The Militant*, 24 March 1934.

Smith. Disappointed in how poorly Bellussi was defended by the ILD, the Left Opposition spearheaded a Bellussi Defense Committee in October 1933, Cannon serving as the Secretary. Months later, *The Militant* campaigned to aid the Italian anarchist as the hotel strike was winding down in March 1934. Cannon, Karsner, Solow, and Tresca were involved in the Anti-Fascist Dinner Committee that raised funds to pay for ship passage of Bellussi to South America so that he would not be forced to return to his unwelcoming homeland. From these beginnings the NPLD consolidated, drawing to its ranks those, like Sidney Hook and Felix Morrow, who came to see the necessity of taking a stand outside of the compromised labor-defense networks of the Communist Party. When League member Harold Robins was convicted, along with a hotel striker, Andre Gras, of assaulting a scab during the January – February 1934 food service confrontation, the nascent NPLD rallied forces and funds, working to have the convictions overturned. Jailed on the basis of perjured testimony and blatant judicial bias, Robins and Gras were eventually freed from Sing-Sing as a consequence of the NPLD's mobilization, which rallied "almost the whole New York labor movement" behind the call to drop the charges and release the two militants.¹⁸⁵

In May 1934, with Herbert Solow serving as its Secretary, a Provisional Committee for Non-Partisan Labor Defense protested the break-up of an international congress of working-class youth organizations in Laren, Holland and the resulting deportation of all delegates. Four of those deported were Germans, delivered to Hitler's waiting border guards. In an effort to save these young militants from what was widely perceived to be an almost certain imprisonment and likely execution, Solow and others attempted to mobilize support in the United States. Their appeals to the Communist Party and its labor defense arm, the ILD, met with denunciation. Solow was treated to an insulting dismissal in an official ILD refusal to endorse the campaign to defend the German deportees: "The leadership of the I.L.D. regards you as an enemy of the working class. It regards you as a provocateur, an agent of the enemy, desperately seeking to secure a foothold within the ranks of the working class, in order to better carry on your disruptive tactics. It regards many of those in your united

185 See Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 101–106; "Bellusi [sic] Case Needs the Support of Workers," *The Militant*, 28 October 1933; "A Bellussi Deporting Imminent: Quick Action Needed to Save Anti-Fascist," *The Militant*, 18 November 1933; "Court Denies Habeas Writ to A. Bellussi: Deportation to Fascist Italy Reaffirmed," *The Militant*, 17 March 1934; "Bellussi Gets 30 Days Stay," *The Militant*, 31 March 1934; "Anti-Fascist Dinner for Bellussi," *The Militant*, 14 April 1934; "Robins and Gras Sentenced," *The Militant*, 21 April 1934; "Committee Moves to Appeal Case of Robins and Gras," *The Militant*, 30 June 1934; "An Appeal for Robins and Gras," and "Robins-Gras Refused Release on Bail: Appeal Pending," *The Militant*, 11 August 1934; *What Is the Non-Partisan Labor Defense* (New York: NPLD, no date, 1935?), 5.

front as of the same character." Cannon, of course, was just one of these non-partisan labor defense supporters. He had signed a statement of protest and concern delivered to the Dutch Consulate General in New York on behalf of the four deported German youths, and editorialized in *The Militant* on the urgent need for a new defense organization.¹⁸⁶ These small labor defense beginnings built on a range of past anti-war, anti-fascist, and anti-imperialist initiatives, as well as extensive coverage of strike movements across the United States and attacks on criminal syndicalism legislation and other anti-labor laws. They also promoted Trotsky's sophisticated and open views on art and philosophy, and highly-publicized mobilizations to save the murals of revolutionary painter Diego Rivera from destruction at the hands of Rockefeller "vandals." Through all of this, the small army of Left Oppositionists led by Cannon gained prestige and credibility in the eyes of many dissident intellectuals.¹⁸⁷

186 Herbert Solow, "Statement of Non-Partisan Labor Defense on German Deportees," *The Militant*, 19 May 1934; James P. Cannon, "Needed Now: A New Defense Organization," *The Militant*, 19 May 1934; "Non-Partisan Labor Defense Protests Police Attack on Workers," *The Militant*, 26 May 1934. See, especially, *What is the Non-Partisan Labor Defense?* 10. The NPLD, which had all the hallmarks of a Cannonesque labor defense initiative, is best understood through this 15-page pamphlet, which outlined the organization's commitment to autonomous, non-partisan legal aid, presentation in the courts and through mass demonstrations of basic labor issues, promotion of defense aims through speakers' bureaus, lectures, and other democratic means, and aid to all class-war prisoners and their dependents. For further Stalinist attack on the NPLD, which was denounced by the Communist Party as nothing more than the usual "Trotskyite divisiveness" see Isidor Schneider, "The Splitting Tactic," *New Masses*, 10 (27 March 1934), 24.

187 Note the following articles in *The Militant* from 1933: "Rockefeller Vandals Threaten Rivera Frescoes," 13 May 1933; "Broad United Front to Preserve Rivera Murals," and "America Intervenes in European Conflict," 20 May 1933; "Hitler Plans to Kill Reds," and "Join Anti-Fascist Rally Today!" 10 June 1933; Trotsky, "The Party in the Field of Art and Philosophy: A Reply to the American Comrades, Martin Gee, Harry Ross, and M. Morris," 22 July 1933; "Roosevelt's Radio Speech Asks for 'Class Peace,'" "Wave of Recovery Strikes," and "St. Louis Hot-Bed of Strikes," 29 July 1933; "Background of the New Deal," "35,000 PA Mine Workers Strike for Right of Union Organization," and "Toronto Workers in Anti-Fascist Strike," 5 August 1933; "Civil War Shakes Cuba: US Ready to Intervene," "AFL Leaders Sanction NRA No-Strike Policy!" and "Labor's Mighty Challenge," 12 August 1933; "US Imperialism Holds High Cards in Cuban Situation," and "NY Dress Workers Gain as Strike Ends; One Union Needed," 26 August 1933; "Hands Off Cuba," 9 September 1933; "Program and Perspectives for the Cuban Revolution," 16 September 1933; Max Shachtman, "Two American Congresses 'Against War,'" 7 October 1933; "German Fascism Bids for Arms Independence," 21 October 1933; "Big Sums for War Purposes," 18 November 1933; "Rivera Murals," 16 December 1933; "New Danger of War in the Far East," 23 December 1933. See as well, Roskolenko, *When I Was Last On Cherry Street*, 163–166.

Its revolutionary face now turned increasingly toward mass struggles, the Left Opposition survived the dog days and slogged through the difficult but necessary task of orienting itself towards the Communist Party. The League consolidated its place in an international movement, and engaged with Trotsky in ways that both confirmed his capacities and insights as well as the ILO leader's willingness to function in ways that recognized the United States section's unique concerns and organizational integrity. Now, as May Day 1934 approached, Cannon and his comrades were eager to advance the cause of a new revolutionary party and a new, non-Stalinist Communist International. Reinvigorated and tested in what had seemed a relentless factional contest within the Communist League of America, Jim Cannon seemed revived in his commitment to and enthusiasm for revolutionary work and the combat of mass struggle.

Cannon debated his old adversary, Jay Lovestone, on 5 March 1934 at Irving Plaza, making the case for a break with all things Stalinist. Sidney Hook, aligned with Muste's AWP, presided at the debate, the philosopher's presence as Chairman symbolizing the interest of intellectuals in developments on the non-Stalinist revolutionary left. Lovestone wanted to reform and unify the Communist International, Cannon to rally revolutionaries to a "clean banner." Approximately 1500 attended the historic debate, with the audience composed of many of the militant workers, independent radicals, dissident intellectuals, rank-and-file CPers, and members of other small, but increasingly active, radical groups whose supporters recently walked picket lines outside of the Waldorf Astoria and other New York hotels. "Too much water had passed over the mill, too many mistakes had been made, too many crimes and betrayals had been committed, too much blood spilled by the Stalinist International," Cannon claimed.

His speech was a relentless compilation of Stalinist error and terror, inside the Soviet Union and outside of it. Reform of the Comintern by the left was impossible, Cannon concluded, and revival by the right was absurd. Insisting that the cornerstone of Stalinist degeneration was the theory and practice of "socialism in one country," Cannon outlined the disastrous outcomes of the shameful capitulations to imperialism in the field of Soviet foreign relations, from blocs with bourgeois nationalist elements in China to alliance with strike breakers in the Anglo-Russian Committee at the time of the British General Strike. Third Period lunacy he held responsible for the bloody defeats suffered by the German and Austrian working classes, as well as the crushing blows delivered to a divided United States labor movement. Stalinist terror inside the Soviet Union decimated the ranks of Bolshevism, through expulsions, exiles, beatings, and even killing, and it was evident in the hooliganism that had dis-

rupted the Socialist Party meeting at Madison Square Gardens. "The blight of Stalinism," Cannon proclaimed with certitude, "is worldwide. ... The third international as a revolutionary force is dead. The revolutionary vanguard, now, as in 1914, must build new parties and a new international." The message was warmly received by many in the audience, and the American Left Opposition seemed finally ready to march through new doors of opportunity.

As Shachtman, his antagonisms to Cannon now dissipated in exuberance for the advance of United States Trotskyism, toured the country, lecturing on "The New Party and the New International," Cannon spoke to larger and larger audiences in New York City. Discussions to create a monthly supplement to the League's press, first broached enthusiastically in January 1932, stalled in the factional morass of the dog days. They revived and received a new impetus within the National Executive Committee in 1934. Proposals for this initiative were "arrived at in conjunction with [a] sympathetic group of intellectuals" and would eventually culminate in a new theoretical journal in which Left Oppositionists could develop revolutionary Marxism at a different and more sophisticated level than was possible in the pages of *The Militant*. Cannon felt himself "at the head of the procession of ... international organization, taking advantage of every opportunity and confidently advancing on all fronts." It was like "old times," Cannon recalled, "although now the struggle took place on a far different, on a higher, plane." One of those advancing fronts, where the Communist League of America lived up to Cannon's sense of the movement's new-found elevation, was Minneapolis.¹⁸⁸

188 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 136–138; "Big Crowd at Debate: Cannon and Lovestone Discuss Internationals," *The Militant*, 10 March 1934; "Shachtman Speaks for the New Party on National Tour" and "Cannon to Speak on Program of the 4th International," *The Militant*, 17 March 1934; Cannon speech notes, "Fourth International: Debate with Lovestone," 5 March 1934, Reel 32, JPC Papers; National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 21 March 1934; 31 March 1934; 8 April 1934; 21 May 1934, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 68–105; George Novack, "New International," in Joseph R. Conlin, ed., *The American Radical Press, 1880–1960* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1974), 518–538. For the initial discussions around the new theoretical organ see CLA, National Executive Committee Minutes, 27 January 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers; 21 May 1934, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers. On Sidney Hook in this period see the impressive study by Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook*.



FIGURE 16 Prelude to the Battle of Deputies Run: Police and a Striker Lay in Street After Club Confrontation, Minneapolis 21 May 1934

ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR

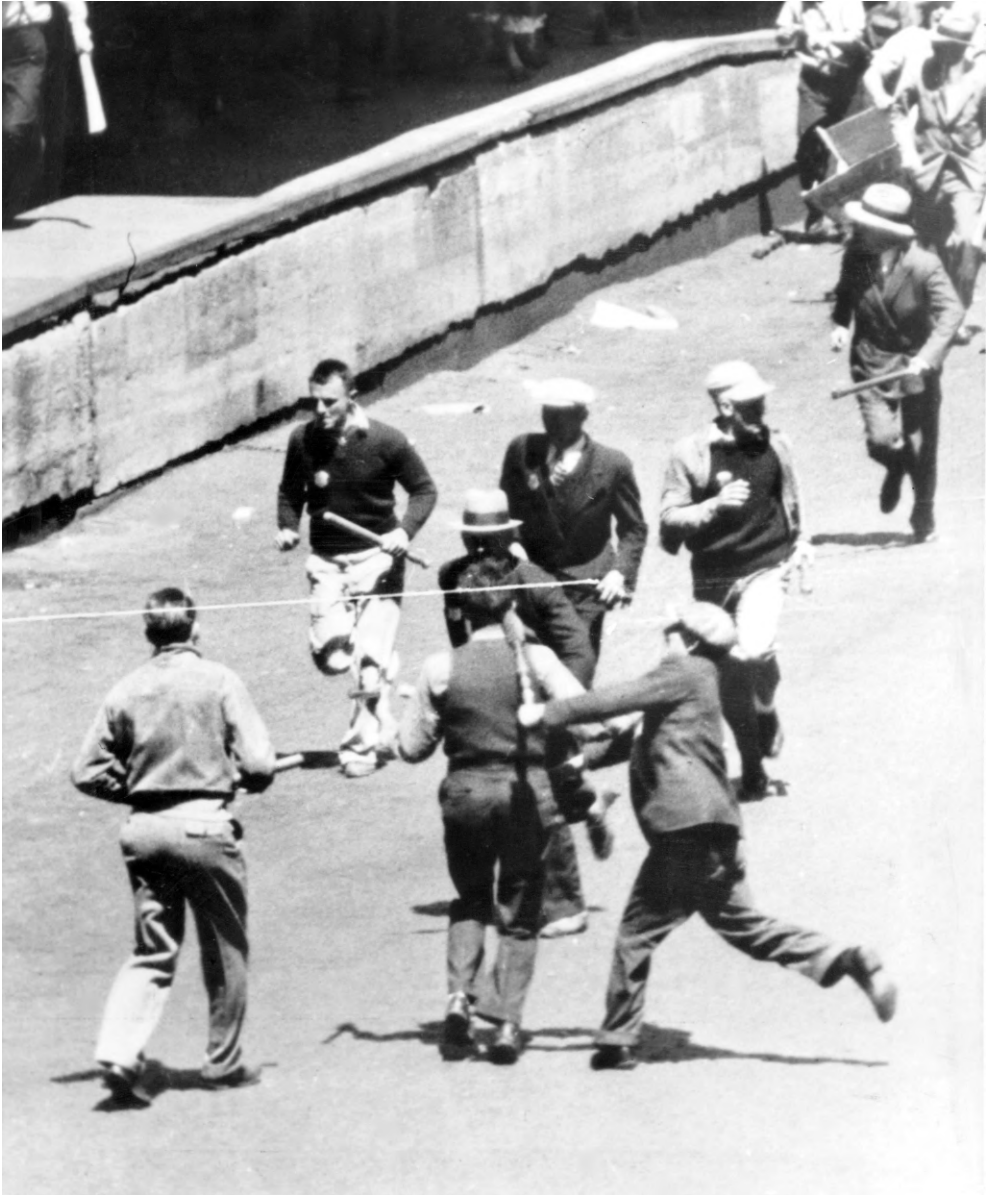


FIGURE 17 Battle of Deputies Run, Minneapolis, 22 May 1934
ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 18 Battle of Deputies Run, Two Women Fighting, 22 May 1934
MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

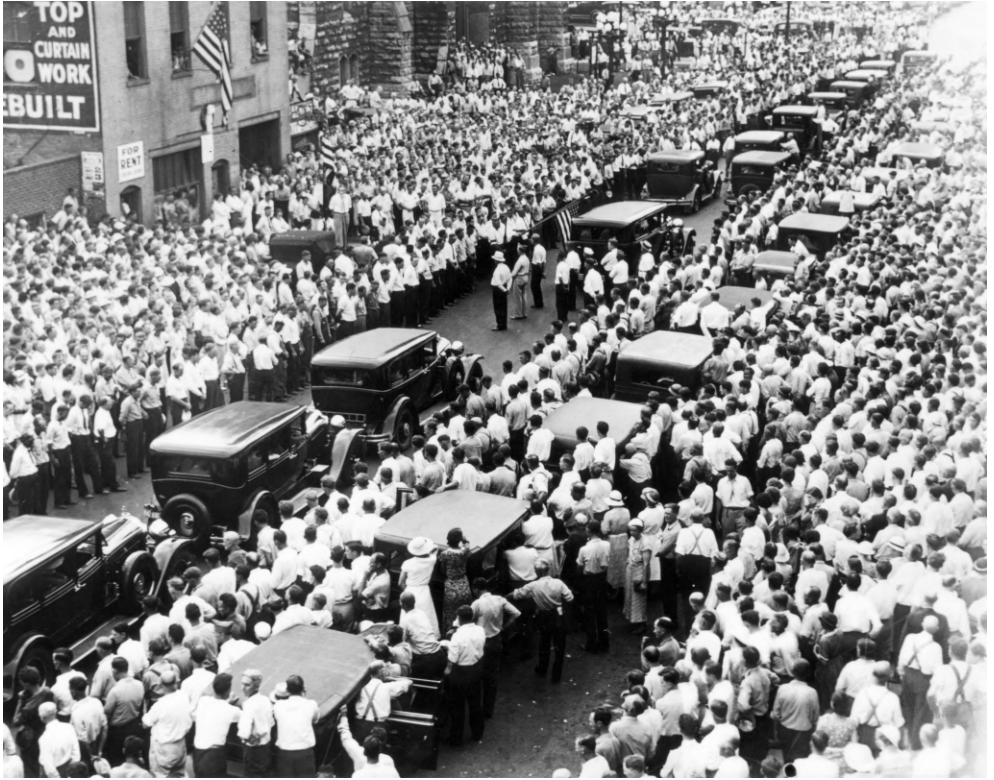


FIGURE 19 Henry Ness Funeral, Minneapolis, 24 July 1934
MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY



FIGURE 20 Max Shachtman and James P. Cannon in Police Custody, Minneapolis, 26 July 1934
MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY



FIGURE 21 Minneapolis Teamster Leaders: George Frosig, Carl Skoglund, Kelly Postal, Miles Dunne, Vincent Ray Dunne
ACME NEWSPICTURES PHOTO, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 22 Women's Auxiliary Feed Teamster Strikers, 1934
MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY



FIGURE 23 Martial Law in Minneapolis: National Guard Escort Striker to Makeshift Military Stockade,
2 August 1934

ACME NEWSPICTURES PHOTO, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR

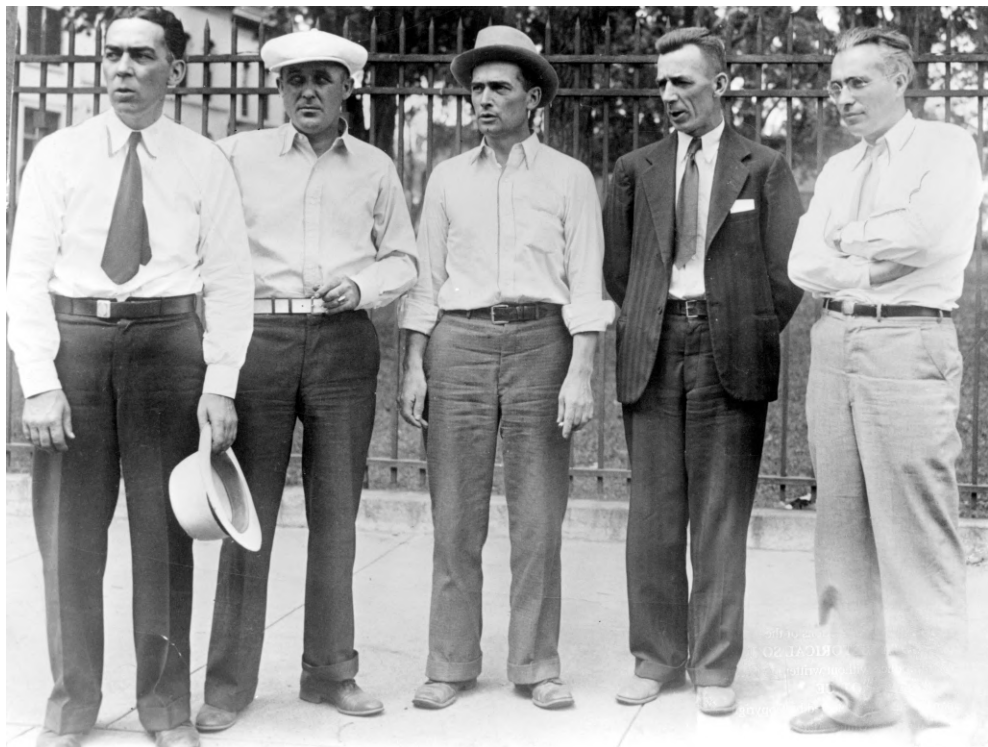


FIGURE 24 Grant Dunne (far left) and Albert Goldman (far right) meet Bill Brown, Miles Dunne, and Vincent Ray Dunne upon their release from the Military Stockade, 2 August 1934
MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BY-LAWS
of
**General Drivers,
Helpers and Inside
Workers Union**

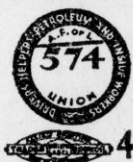


LOCAL NO. 574
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA



FIGURE 25 By-Laws of General Drivers, Helpers and Inside Workers Union
IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR

THE ORGANIZER



Bulletin of the Strike Committee of 100 and official organ of General Drivers, Helpers, Petroleum and Inside Workers Union, Local 574, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor.

STAFF

Farrell Dobbs.....	Fall Guy
Jim McGee.....	Office Boy
Carlos ("head ¼ s") Hudson.....	End Man
Jerry Hudson.....	Artiste
Max Marsh.....	St. Paul Correspondent
Albert Goldman.....	Mouthpiece
Marvel Dobbs.....	Military Reporter
William S. Brown, the Three Dunne Sisters and Carl Skoglund.....	Stooges
Herbert Solow.....	Guest Conductor

"The first strike daily in American history" — tribute from **The Organizer**.

FORTY-ONE ISSUES THAT KNOCKED
THEM FOR A LOOP!

Published every day but Sunday at 225 South Third St.,
Minneapolis, Minnesota

SATURDAY, AUGUST 25, 1934

Volume 1, Number 40

FIGURE 26 Mock Masthead, The Organizer, 1934
JEAN TUSSEY, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR

Minneapolis Militants

1 General Strike

In 1934, Louis Adamic sent a revised edition of his 1931 book, *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America*, off to his publisher. He confessed to have “rewritten comparatively few pages,” but considered his study nonetheless “almost a new book,” in that it anticipated invigorated class upheavals later in 1934. “America will be,” Adamic wrote, “the scene of thousands of bitter disputes between labor and capital and between radical or revolutionary and conservative (in many cases racketeering) labor unions.” Foreseeing that these struggles would inevitably involve violent conflict, Adamic predicted they would be of “paramount importance” in charting a new path for workers in the United States:

American labor is faced with the *immediate* necessity of breaking up the oligarchy of the A.F. of L., and overhauling that organization to be able to meet the new problems, and of ridding itself of the NRA-supported company unions, which lately have been formed by the industrialists for the purpose of preventing regular unionization. Both of these aims can be achieved *only* by an avalanche of rank-and-file strikes with full union recognition as their chief objective. Should any considerable number of strikes be successful, recognition of unions would be followed by campaigns, under new leadership, for the organization of unions along industrial lines; which eventually, I hope, will lead to the formation of a new movement, a *real* American labor movement, fresh, radical, and revolutionary, along industrial and political lines – a realistic *American* movement of the producing masses

1934 was a watershed year in which a surge of rank-and-file militancy tripled the number of striking workers compared to the late 1920s. In February 1934, the *New York Times* was already complaining that there were far too many arrests, injuries, and even deaths on picket lines. By the end of the year more than 50 workers had been killed as a consequence of their involvement in strikes. Federal troops occupied strike districts. Criminal syndicalist charges were brought against militant workers and legal injunctions of a broad, sweeping character were secured to tame the labor revolt. In most cases this repressive onslaught

only further exacerbated class tensions, calling into question the impartiality of the state and federal authorities in Roosevelt's New Deal administration.¹

Jim Cannon, like Adamic, sensed in 1933 that class relations in the United States might take an abrupt turn that could radically reshape the American workers' movement. Yet Cannon did not discount the importance of the established business unionists Adamic tended to write off. Cannon vehemently rejected the Communist Party's policy of attempting to create new, revolutionary unions that would compete with and challenge the class collaborationist labor leadership of the American Federation of Labor [AFL]. This Third Period embrace of "Red" unionism meant abandoning the bulk of the organized workers, leaving them at the mercies of mainstream AFL trade union bureaucrats. Cannon anticipated that most of the class battles about to erupt in 1934 would be fought out in the established AFL unions, a sector that could not be dismissed as irrelevant. In September 1933, Cannon wrote in *The Militant* that "the Left Wing's place is in the A.F. of L. unions." Well aware that the ossified AFL leadership would not "organize the masses of unskilled workers in the basic industries for effective struggle," Cannon called on revolutionaries to be in the forefront of mobilizations that could well rejuvenate the trade union movement:

The resurgent struggles of the masses, following the inevitable collapse of the Roosevelt program and the disillusionment of the masses who are now captivated by it, will very probably break out of the formal bounds of the A.F. of L. and seek expression in a new trade union movement. But in order to influence such an eventuality the revolutionaries must connect themselves with the live process of the movement at every stage of its development.

Adamant that, in 1933–34, "The center of gravity ... is unquestionably in the conservative mass organizations," Cannon declared unequivocally, "That is where we must be."²

1 Louis Adamic, *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America, Revised Edition* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1934), vii, ix, 456–457; Irving Bernstein, *The Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933–1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), 126; P.K. Edwards, *Strikes in the United States, 1881–1974* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 134–138; David Brody, "Labor and the Great Depression: The Interpretive Prospects," *Labor History*, 13 (Spring 1972), 242; James Green, "Working Class Militancy in the Great Depression," *Radical America*, 6 (1972), 1–36; Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step: Twenty Years of the CIO* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1964), 17, quoting *New York Times*, 11 February 1934; Hugo Oehler, "The New Deal: A New Stage in the NRA," *The Militant*, 30 December 1933.

2 James P. Cannon, "The Left Wing's Place is in A.F. of L. Unions," *The Militant*, 2 September

Cannon was soon to leap into the midst of a struggle pivotal in forging what Adamic referred to as a “*real* American labor movement.” “The hour has now struck when we are to be put to a new test,” Cannon wrote in the 29 July 1934 issue of *The Organizer*, a daily strike bulletin of Minneapolis’s Local 574 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters [IBT]. “The eyes of the labor movement of the whole country are upon us,” declared Cannon, convinced that “workers everywhere are looking to us.” He exhorted striking workers to “resist every effort to strip us of our fighting strength,” declaring that only militants “with an unshakeable conviction in the justice of [their] cause” and “an iron resolve to fight to the last ditch” would be able to “bring the employers to terms which make it possible for us to live like human beings.”³

As Cannon issued his exhortation, longshoremen were striking west coast ports from Bellingham, Washington to San Diego, California. One of the key issues was the “slave market shape-up” – a hiring system in which crowds of men gathered at designated locales like San Francisco’s Embarcadero every morning at 6 A.M., hoping to be chosen by a foreman for the work available that day. It was a degrading experience too often ending in the humiliation of rejection. Flocking to the International Longshoremen’s Union [ILA], dock laborers pushed reluctant union officials to fight for the replacement of the shape-up by a union-controlled hiring hall. This demand precipitated a bitter strike on 9 May 1934, in which the formidable Waterfront Employers’ Association employed 1700 strikebreakers, many of them university students. This move sparked a wave of generalized working-class anger. Teamsters refused to move goods unloaded by scab labor. Before long, unrelated industries in other states were idled. The strike also drew into the struggle members of ten maritime unions as thousands of sailors, firemen, water tenders, cooks, stewards, and licensed officers linked arms with the striking longshoremen. San Francisco erupted into a hotbed of militant working-class solidarity; pitched battles raged between union pickets and armed police.

The ILA leadership was anxious to end the strike as soon as possible, but when union officials attempted to present their protocols of labor peace, they were frequently jeered, booed off podiums by the rowdy rank-and-file. On the July 4 Independence Day holiday, 700 police armed with tear gas and sawed-

1933. See, also, for an even more explicit rejection of Stalinism’s Third Period advocacy of what Cannon called “paper unions,” as well as a critique of AFL fetishism, James P. Cannon, “The Left Wing Needs a New Policy and a New Leadership,” *The Militant*, 16 September 1933; James P. Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism: Report of a Participant* (New York: Pioneer, 1944), 142–143.

3 James P. Cannon, *Notebook of an Agitator* (New York: Pioneer, 1958), 78–80.

off shotguns accompanied five truckloads of strikebreakers in a determined attempt to reopen the port of San Francisco. The strikers and their supporters attacked the convoy and fighting broke out; 25 people were hospitalized. Two days later, the crowds were larger and the police more trigger-happy. The melee had a more tragic denouement, leaving 115 injured, and two strikers and an onlooker dead. California's governor declared a state of emergency, and sent 2,000 National Guardsmen to string barbed wire around the Embarcadero and set up machine-gun nests to cover potential hot-spots of confrontation. Armored cars patrolled the streets adjacent to the docks, where scabs unloaded freight with impunity.

The violence of the conflict and the utilization of the armed might of the state to break the resolve of the longshoremen backfired. San Francisco's labor movement rallied to the cause of the seemingly beaten dock laborers. A mass funeral for the workers killed on 5 July 1934 drew 30,000 into the streets in a solemn procession. Within days, over twenty unions passed motions, mostly unanimously, in favor of a mass strike in solidarity with the dockworkers. Soon delegates from the 115 unions that composed the traditionally conservative Central Labor Council met to debate the pros and cons of a General Strike. San Francisco was eerily quiet as trolleys and taxis stopped running, theatres and bars closed their doors, and industrial plants and small shops found that business as usual was impossible. Upwards of 130,000 workers declined to come to work, and window placards in downtown stores declared, "Closed Till the Boys Win."

The Labor Council, its cautious leadership quaking in fear as the mass strike appeared to be taking on a life of its own, attempted to isolate and marginalize the radicals, force crucial sectors of striking workers back to their jobs, and exempt others on the grounds they were providing essential services. Labor officials even organized "strike police" to prevent pickets from intimidating those workers the trade union council had sent back to work. Vigilante thugs, orchestrated by a Citizens' Committee of 500 prominent San Franciscans, smashed up radical labor offices and assaulted workers' leaders in an attempt to derail the mobilization. The capitalist press portrayed the strike as a "Communist-inspired and led revolt against organized government," and Roosevelt's National Recovery Administration [NRA] chief, General Hugh S. Johnson, engaged in anti-strike tirades about the necessity of nipping a San Francisco uprising in the bud. Immense pressure was put on the ILA to submit all the issues in the strike, including the key demand that a hiring hall replace the hated shape-up, to arbitration. When the General Strike began to flag, with workers in a variety of unions drifting back to their jobs, William Green, President of the American Federation of Labor, disowned the San Francisco militants.

Things dragged on for another ten days, before the longshoremen finally conceded to arbitrate all issues and returned to work on 27 July 1934. The outcome of their two-and-a-half months of struggle was a saw-off. A hiring hall was won, but it was to be operated by a joint Labor Relations Committee composed of the ILA and the waterfront employers. Union dispatchers were required to assign jobs to longshoremen "without favoritism or discrimination" whether they were "union or non-union." Employers insisted on the right "to have dispatched to them, when available, the gangs in their opinion best qualified to do their work" and were free to introduce "labor saving devices" and use "methods of discharging and loading cargo ... best suited to the conduct of ... business." Workers, in turn, secured an agreement for full pay after a six-hour day and a thirty-hour week, averaged monthly. Given the fluctuating intensity of labor requirements on any given day, this was not as big of an employer concession as it would have been in other occupational sectors. The longshoremen made gains on wage-rates and overtime and demonstrated their capacity to carry out a sustained struggle that culminated in a General Strike involving tens of thousands of workers. The strike catapulted Harry Bridges, a young, pro-Communist firebrand, into a figure of national prominence. Combative and unyielding, the west coast longshore union established a reputation as a nursery of radical thought and a militant stronghold of working-class struggle.⁴

Toledo, Ohio, seemed worlds away from San Francisco's Embarcadero. A glass and auto parts center, Toledo's population of roughly 275,000 was less than half that of the more cosmopolitan west coast port. Its parts factories supplied the major auto manufacturers in Michigan, especially Chrysler. The Toledo formula for success was simple: a low-wage, non-union workforce turned out selected car components more cheaply than could the larger auto-

4 The above paragraphs draw on many sources, among them: Robert Cantwell, "San Francisco: Act One," *New Republic*, 25 July 1934; "Government by Strike," *Business Week*, 21 July 1934; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 259–298; Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Premier, 1974), 189–200; Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 31–33; Joseph P. Goldberg, *The Maritime Story: A Study in Labor-Management Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 130–162; Stephen Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea: A History of the Sailor's Union of the Pacific, 1885–1985* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 81–114; Charles P. Larrowe, *Shape-up and Hiring Hall* (Berkeley: Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California, 1956); Larrowe, *Harry Bridges: The Rise and Fall of Radical Labor in the United States* (New York: Lawrence Hill, 1972); Mike Quinn, *The Big Strike* (Olema, CA: Olema, 1949); Howard Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets? The Making of Radical and Conservative Unions on the Waterfront* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988); David F. Selvin, *A Terrible Anger: The 1934 Waterfront and General Strikes in San Francisco* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996).

mobile plants. Electric Auto-Lite, which produced lighting, ignition, and starting systems, dominated the Ohio auto parts supply sector. It was founded by Clem Miniger, a hated business huckster and financier with an estimated fortune of over \$80 million. Miniger's Ohio Bond and Security Bank closed its doors after the 1929 economic collapse. Thousands of depositors were left in the lurch. Some 28,000 Toledo auto workers lost their jobs when the Willys-Overland auto company declared bankruptcy. The city, seething with antagonism toward its wealthy elite, became the center of a radical unemployed movement, galvanized in good measure by A.J. Muste's American Workers Party [AWP]. In 1934, the Musteites intersected a struggle for trade union rights by workers at Auto-Lite, who were aggrieved to learn that their wages were less than National Recovery Administration minimums, ostensibly because of a "misinterpretation" of the government agency's codes.⁵

The AWP was launched in 1933 by pro-labor intellectuals affiliated with the Brookwood Labor College, most of whom were previously aligned with Muste's Conference for Progressive Labor Action [CPLA]. It sought to steer a course between "procapitalist labor bureaucrats and communists," and the AWP that developed out of the CPLA was a heterogeneous organization moving leftwards amid the deepening and obvious crisis of capitalism. In 1931 Cannon predicted that these "progressives" could never realize their goal of creating a third path between revolutionary socialism and the free enterprise system. Their political trajectory tended to always follow the lead of already-insurgent workers, perhaps even prodding them to further militancy, only, at the decisive hour, to press the rising masses back into the containments of convention. This was abundantly clear to Cannon, Swabeck, Shachtman, Oehler, and others in the Illinois coal fields in the early 1930s, where Muste, Tom Tippet, and other formerly affiliated Brookwood Labor College activists charted a particular course of alliance with elements in the Progressive Miners of America that tended to thwart the realization of a class struggle leadership. Yet the AWP was itself a product of the working-class ferment of 1933–34. Rank-and-file militants in the unions and the unemployed movement where the Musteites had been campaigning were both influencing the politics of the old CPLA types as well as pushing the new party to be more resolute in its stands against capitalism. The result was that the AWP was born pressured in the direction of revolutionary politics. Muste, as the head of the new party, was certainly propelled to the left.

Between 1929–34, then, conditions were changing rapidly. This necessitated a shifting of tactical gears with respect to how Trotskyists related to figures such

5 See Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 218–219; Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 19–20.

as Muste, who appeared to be shedding at least a part of his reformist politics, and organizations like the AWP that showed signs of containing within their midst both “proletarian revolutionists” and “reactionary scoundrels and fakers.” When Cannon and the Communist League of America [CLA] were functioning as an external Opposition to the Communist Party, it was not possible to enter into blocs with Muste’s progressives against the Party. But the CLA eventually discarded its external Opposition stand, and sought to build a new party and a new international. Stalinist Third Period sectarianism isolated the Communist Party more and more from an increasingly radicalizing reformist milieu, in which Muste and his followers were leading elements. Cannon and his comrades necessarily adapted to the new contours of the political landscape, as we will see in some detail in a later chapter. As the CLA leader wrote as early as 1931, the progressives in Muste’s milieu were “weather cocks. The decisive factor is the pressure of the masses. From this it follows that the most important aspect of the united front tactic is not ‘negotiations’ (with the progressive reformists) but widespread and intelligently-conducted agitation.”⁶

Despite relatively small numbers, the American Workers Party members played a significant role in the wave of union drives that swept through Toledo’s auto parts plants in the summer of 1933 and that continued into 1934. If the impetus for class struggle came from the ranks, this upsurge pushed the AFL’s Federal Labor Union 18384 to the forefront. A number of plants were struck, but the walkouts ended with minor concessions and vague assurances that negotiations would continue. The companies were buying time; the workers grew increasingly disenchanted. By March 1934 an industry-wide strike threat necessitated the intervention of Roosevelt, whose mediations led to the establishment of the Automobile Labor Board. At Auto-Lite, the employer took a particularly hard line against unionization, ordering the AFL business agent off the premises and, according to Local 18384, discriminating against its members. In mid-April 1934, Auto-Lite workers walked out for the second time in less than two months. The strike was anything but a resounding expression of solidarity: more than half the employees remained at their jobs and the plant, as well as

6 See *Dog Days: James P. Cannon vs. Max Shachtman in the Communist League of America* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 2002), 63–66, 430–431, 585, 590, 604; James P. Cannon, “The Communists and the Progressives,” *The Militant*, 1 April 1931; Arne Swabeck, “Results of the Illinois Miners’ Revolt,” *The Militant*, 15 May 1931; James P. Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism: Report of a Participant* (New York: Pioneer, 1944), 170–171; Nat Hentoff, *Peace Agitator: The Story of A.J. Muste* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 56–90; Louis Francis Budenz, *This is My Story* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1947), 103–113; Joseph Rayback, *A History of American Labor* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 318.

others in the auto parts sector, was kept open. Strikebreakers were hired, supplementing the core work group that refused to join the labor stoppage.

It was at this point that the AWP entered the picture. Louis Budenz, Executive Secretary of the Party and Muste's second-in-command, was directing the strike strategy of Local 18384 by the end of April 1934. The Lucas County Unemployed League, led by the young Musteites Ted Selander and Sam Pollack, coordinated the increasingly close relations of Toledo's jobless masses and the striking auto parts workers. Young AWP recruits and future Cannonists like Art Preis threw themselves into the battle. Mass picketing of strikers and Unemployed League members blocked scabs and supplies from entering the Auto-Lite factory. When injunctions prohibited such militant activity, Selander and Pollack persuaded Local 18384's Strike Committee to fight on in spite of the legal impediment, defied the judicial order, were repeatedly arrested, and filled the courtroom with their supporters. The noisy throng forced the judge to back off, issue a "no decision," and release the arrested rabble rousers. Selander, Pollack, and their supporters, hundreds strong, returned immediately to picket duty, the young AWPers resuming their leadership of the unemployed, whose support for the strikers bewildered White House correspondents. One newsman wrote that it was common to see the unemployed "appear on the streets, fight police, and raise hell in general." In Toledo, however, the unemployed charted a new path: "they appeared on the picket lines to help striking employees win a strike, tho you would expect their interest would lie the other way – that is, in going in and getting the jobs the other men had laid down." Under militant class struggle leadership, Toledo politics was making for strange, and startlingly effective, bedfellows. Budenz continued the crusade to reinstate "peaceful mass picketing" and the "smashing of the injunction." Auto-Lite production continued as armed company guards and special deputies patrolled the perimeter of the plant and stockpiled weapons inside what was quickly becoming a militarized compound.

Crowds surrounding the Auto-Lite plant soon swelled to 6000, growing daily. On 23 May 1934, Budenz was arrested at the mass picket and hauled off to jail. With 10,000 workers and their allies howling derision, a deputy beat an elderly strike supporter "unmercifully." A six-day long "Battle of Toledo" erupted. Fighting broke out in the mid-afternoon and continued until midnight. Angry workers laid siege to the factory; 1500 strikebreakers were imprisoned. The scene was one of almost medieval tumult: windows were smashed with stones and bricks, many of them launched from giant slingshots improvised from rubber inner tubes; fire hoses were used by those trapped inside the plant to drive the angry workers back. When every window in the factory had been smashed one striker shouted: "Now you have your open shop." Cars in the plant's parking lot

were turned over, doused with gasoline, and torched. Guards and scabs barricaded doors and beat back invading platoons of strikers and their unemployed allies, who nonetheless managed to fight their way into the Auto-Lite premises three times to engage in combat. From the roof, company guards showered the surging crowd with tear gas canisters; when the supply of corporate bombs ran low, the stock was replenished by a Cleveland munitions firm.

Nine-hundred Ohio National Guardsmen arrived on the scene a day after the "Battle of Toledo" commenced. They were able to evacuate many of the 1500 strikebreakers trapped inside the Auto-Lite building. The scabs looked a "sorry sight" according to local press reports. The presence of the National Guard, and its role in protecting the hated strikebreakers and extricating them from the besieged Auto-Lite plant, inflamed an already explosive atmosphere. Women jeered "the landing of the Marines," while soap boxers, many of them veterans sporting World War I medals, offered impromptu lectures on how the Guardsmen were breaking the strike. This was the calm. Battle storms punctuated the talk of unions and what honorable soldiers should and should not be doing. The strikers' ranks faced a hail of Guardsmen bullets, which left two dead. Twenty-five were wounded, including ten Guardsmen who required medical treatment. As darkness enveloped a six-square-block martial law radius around the Auto-Lite plant, roving bands of workers clashed with the National Guard, driving their armed antagonists back into the refuge of the factory, which had suffered some \$150,000 in physical damage. As four additional companies of National Guardsmen were deployed, the "Battle of Toledo" became the largest display of military power in the peacetime history of the state of Ohio. Talk of a General Strike spread among Toledo's trade unionists, encouraged by the Communist Party. The next days saw more skirmishes, including a weekend clash on 26 May 1934. Unemployed leaders like Selander were swept up in a National Guard dragnet, held incommunicado. The *New Republic* surveyed the carnage and concluded that for all of the Roosevelt administration's promises of labor rights, "The sorry American scene in Toledo finds its setting in broken promises of the New Deal."

It was not until 31 May 1934 that some quiet was restored. Muste, ill at ease with the violent course of the Auto-Lite struggle, apparently worked with local authorities to come up with the framework for a truce. The company would keep the factory closed, the National Guard would withdraw, and the AFL union would take responsibility for insuring that picket lines remained peaceful. By this time, 85 of the 103 AFL unions affiliated with Toledo's Central Labor Union were on record as favoring a General Strike. There was, however, little appetite for this among conservative trade union officials. At a monster rally of 40,000 at the Lucas County Courthouse Square on 1 June 1934, these labor functionaries

stood mute on the threatened mass strike, opting instead to assure the militant gathering that victory was assured, and Roosevelt would come to the aid of the Auto-Lite strikers.

With the promise of concessions, the militancy of the strikers and their supporters in the AWP and the Unemployed League appeared to have achieved a breakthrough in Toledo. The final settlement at Auto-Lite won Local 18384 a modest wage increase and, more importantly, secured the AFL union exclusive bargaining rights in the struck plant. To be sure, the back-to-work conditions insisted that the Auto-Lite plant's reopening would proceed through a hierarchical rehiring process: pre-strike employees who worked during the stoppage were to be hired first, strikers second, and scabs third. Muste and Budenz indignantly denounced this as a capitulation, but their objections were impolitely dismissed. The AWP and the Unemployed Leagues, which had played a critical, albeit informal, role in shoring up a flagging struggle, cultivating militancy, and winning important concessions, had little leverage with the AFL Local as it hammered out a settlement.

Something of the direct action tactics of the AWP rubbed off on the workers, however. When it appeared that Auto-Lite was dragging its heels in rehiring strikers, crowds amassed outside the factory gates. Their intimidating presence, and recollection of the damage that could be inflicted on the company, forced the hand of management, which conceded jobs to all of the strikers immediately. Big winners in the titanic clash of labor and capital were 275 members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers at Toledo Edison, who piggybacked off the Auto-Lite workers' militancy to gain a 22 percent wage hike and union recognition. These victories wrote *finis* to any General Strike mobilization, but they paved the way for ongoing union victories in the automobile industry. Before the year was out, 19 more auto parts plants in Toledo would fall to union organizers. A Toledo Chevrolet plant was rocked with the first successful strike in the history of this corporate giant in 1935, an early blow in what proved to be a long and taxing effort to establish trade unionism in the open shop bastions of the automobile industry.⁷

7 The above paragraphs draw on "Labor: Bricks, Bats & Blood," *Time*, 4 June 1934; an oral history collection, Philip A. Korth and Margaret Beegle, eds., *I Remember Like Today: The Auto-Lite Strike of 1934* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State Press, 1988); "What is Behind Toledo," *New Republic*, 6 June 1934; "The General Strike," *New Republic*, 25 July 1934; Roy Rosenzweig, "Radicals and the Jobless: Musteites and the Unemployed Leagues," *Labor History*, 16 (Winter 1975), 51–77; Jo Ann Ooiman Robinson, *Abraham Went Out: A Biography of A.J. Muste* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 52–54; A.J. Muste, "Sketches for an Autobiography," and "Trade Unions and the Revolution," [1935] in Nat Hentoff, ed., *The Essays of A.J. Muste* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 157–160, 186–194; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 205–229; Brecher, *Strike!*

A writer in the *New Republic* observed that Toledo workers realized that, "It is ... now or never labor must establish its rights; it must be demonstrated that without the workers' consent no activity can be carried on; it is believed that those who do not 'hang together will hang separately.'" The 1934 mass sentiment in favor of the General Strike revealed both the capacity for struggle of American labor in this period and the critical role committed leftist militants could play in igniting the spark of working-class upheaval. As a consequence, the complacent defeatism of the ensconced trade union bureaucracy was presented with an alternative and dealt a series of forceful blows. The meaning of all of this was not lost on the business press, much of which responded to the mass strike mobilizations of 1934 with exaggeration and political fear-mongering. In a July 1934 editorial, "General Strike," *Business Week* deplored the San Francisco "outrage" as little more than "insurrection," "in one word, revolution." Shrill denunciations of "Government by Strike," were incongruously combined with smug assurances that "a general strike cannot win. If it is complete, the public smashes it; if it isn't complete, it is futile." Organized labor, pontificated one established voice of capitalist interests, must surely learn "the tragic peril of following radical leadership." But the disgruntled, non-revolutionary workers within the mainstream AFL unions who participated in the mass strikes of this era learned an entirely different lesson. They came to view the various rabble-rousers and advisers of the self-proclaimed socialist and revolutionary left as potentially valuable allies with useful ideas about why the capitalist system seemed unwilling or unable to provide a decent standard of living and a secure future for working people. And, equally important, these 'outside agitators' often proved their mettle in staying the course of class struggle. They often won workers to understandings that repression, be it waged by the state or the employers, must be met with firm resistance and adroit, but implacable, refusal to bend the knee to power.

In the militant struggles that erupted in 1934 particular kinds of workers came to the fore. Usually those playing key roles had little connection with and even less faith in a complacent layer of trade union officialdom loyal to traditions of privileged and respectable labor. Once bottled up class confrontation was uncorked, Communists, Musteiteis, Trotskyists, or other dissidents might come to play important roles, their influence registering in militant struggles

200–202; Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 19–24; Edward Levinson, *Labor on the March* (New York: University Books, 1956, original 1938), 66–67; Sidney Fine, "The Toledo Chevrolet Strike of 1935," *Ohio Historical Quarterly*, 67 (October 1958), 326–356. See also the conceptually rich Rebecca Zietlow and James Gray Pope, "The Toledo Auto-Lite Strike and the Fight Against 'Wage Slavery,'" *University of Toledo Law Review*, 38 (2007), 839–854.

that sometimes led to important victories. It was no coincidence that the sections of the working class that embraced the mass strike in 1934 were ones ill-served by the conservative craft hierarchy dominating mainstream American trade unionism. The insurgent mobilizations destined to reshape the labor movement in the United States were not led by the old crafts – carpenters, metal tradesmen, and other skilled workers – but rather by unskilled and semi-skilled longshoremen and coal heavers, truckers, textile mill operatives, and machine tenders.⁸

The post-Labor Day 1934 walkout by hundreds of thousands of cotton, fabric, silk, and woolen workers closed mills in Alabama, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Maine, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Connecticut. As we have seen in the last chapter, these striking wage earners made an emphatic point: this explosion of class resentment was a new uprising of workers no longer willing to accept industrial disenfranchisement. Punctuated by riots, bombings, shootings, and employer intransigence, as well as militant and roving picket lines known as “flying squadrons,” the General Strike in the textile industry ended badly. The strikers were defeated and often found themselves and their families evicted from company housing. Hundreds of mills refused to rehire workers who dared to march out defiantly a few weeks earlier and, despite Roosevelt’s pleas, strikers were blacklisted. Starvation stalked many mill towns. Journalist Martha Gellhorn, who visited North Carolina at the end of November 1934, reported that in the aftermath of the defeat workers lived “in terror of being penalized for joining unions.” According to her, the bosses were “in a state of mingled rage and fear against this imported monstrosity: organized labor.”⁹

8 For background on the craft/operative differentiation see David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). For a discussion of the upheaval in the American Federation of Labor in the early-to-mid-1930s that outlines both the call within the AFL to organize the unorganized as well as the general failure of this initiative to achieve concrete advances, see Levinson, *Labor on the March*, esp. 49–78. Levinson concludes that, “The A.F. of L. campaign had been a complete failure, except in the Toledo sector, where the rank and file ignored both the Wolman board and the A.F. of L., struck against the Electric Auto-Lite Company, refused to permit the smashing of their ranks by injunction and the militia, and finally won a 5-per-cent wage increase, a six months’ contract, and the death of a company union” (64). For the *Business Week* commentary see “Government by Strike,” and “General Strike” (21 July 1934), 7–8, 36.

9 Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 298–317; Brecher, *Strike!* 209–219; Levinson, *Labor on the March*, 73–76. See also Michael Goldfield, *The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 267–281.

Not every mass strike, then, ended in working-class victory. The mass walkout of textile workers in 1934 suggested, contrary to the ideological posturing of *Business Week*, that where involvement of revolutionary agitators affiliated with left organizations was weakest, so too were the chances of specific successes lessened.¹⁰ Regardless of the outcome, the General Strike did declare, loudly and proudly, a new mood of labor insurgency. As Clifford Odets' 1937 proletarian play, put on by the Group Theatre in New York, declared emphatically, many workers discovered in this period that the only answer to their worsening conditions was "STRIKE, STRIKE, STRIKE!!!" This rallying cry traversed the land in 1934.¹¹

In 1906 Rosa Luxemburg observed, "If anyone were to undertake to make the mass strike generally as a form of proletarian action and object of methodical agitation, and to go house-to-house canvassing with this 'idea' in order to gradually win the working class to it, it would be as idle and profitless and absurd an occupation as it would be to seek to make the idea of the revolution or of the fight at the barricades the object of a special agitation." No mere "isolated act," the General Strike could not be conjured up, nor "called at will." Rather, possibilities for such actions emerged during periods of intensified social struggle when the regular mechanisms of conducting or mediating class conflict broke down. The 1934 United States general strikes that found expression "in the consciousness of the mass of proletarians," had their roots in years of frustration and failure. They proved fertile ground for small but influential groups of determined socialist militants.

As the Communist International learned from the Le Havre mass strike of 1922, the General Strike was neither an automatic outcome of the spontaneous eruption of class grievance, nor was it easily mobilized. The painful experience of failed General Strikes meant that the mistakes of revolutionary trade unionists, syndicalists, and communist and socialist parties were exposed alongside the treacherous misleadership of a conciliatory layer of labor bureaucrats. This instilled in revolutionary leaders like Leon Trotsky the need "to pay the utmost attention to the problems of mass action." It was incumbent upon all revolutionaries, wrote Trotsky, to "prepare down to the last detail the very possibility of mass action by means of large-scale and intense agitation; and to fit the

10 James P. Cannon, "Textile Strike Debacle," in Fred Stanton and Michael Taber, eds., *James P. Cannon: The Communist League of America, 1932-1934 - Writings and Speeches, 1932-1934* (New York: Monad Press, 1985), 361-363; A.J. Muste, "Trade Unions and the Revolution," [1935] in Hentoff, ed., *Essays of Muste*, 186-194.

11 Clifford Odets, *Waiting for Lefty: A Play in Six Episodes* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937), 45-46; Brecher, *Strike!* 209-219.

slogans to the readiness and the ability of the masses to act.” As we will see, this was a good part of what led to the success of Trotskyists in Minneapolis in 1934.¹²

Elements of the United States literati of the early-to-mid 1930s took great interest in what was unfolding on picket lines and in strike mobilizations. The violence of class struggle became important staples in many a writer’s representational arsenal. Two outstanding examples drew on the Minneapolis events of 1934: Charles Rumford Walker’s *American City: A Rank-and-File History* (1937) and Meridel Le Sueur’s short story, “What Happens in a Strike” (1934). Walker sought to portray “the dynamics of social change” that were fermenting below the surface of one of America’s archetypal urban centers, while Le Sueur addressed “the drama forming from deep instinctive and unified forces of real and terrible passion.” In “Notes for Life-Story of a Truck Driver,” which he assembled in preparation for writing his book, Walker referred to “the complex machinery of class warfare,” in which members of the General Drivers’ Union were “sergeants in a thousands-strong strike army.” This regiment fought what Walker judged “two of the bloodiest and most ingeniously ruthless strikes in American labor history.” Le Sueur’s notebooks from 1934–35 convey her artistic imperative to capture, in a “huge novel,” the drama of class conflict and the “suffering” associated with this “great awkward surging ... social movement”:

There is a strike going on in Minneapolis. I feel anxious ... eager to see what is happening. ... I feel it is a real emergent world Emergent Coming from the past ... into the future. It is the point of emerging Violence ... it is the point of departure of growth.

Le Sueur looked at what was happening in 1934, and knew that “you damn yourself forever not getting into it.” She feared being “left out,” withdrawing and not

12 The above paragraphs draw on Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party, & the Trade Unions and The Junius Pamphlet* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971), 17, 51, 92; Leon Trotsky, *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Volume 2 (New York: Monad 1977), 278–280. See for a range of commentary: Wilfrid Harris Crook, *The General Strike: A Study of Labor’s Tragic Weapon in Theory and Practice* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1931); Phil H. Goodstein, *The Theory of the General Strike from the French Revolution to Poland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); and on the significant events in Le Havre, John Barzman, *Dockers, métaux, ménagères: mouvements sociaux et cultures militants au Havre, 1913–1923* (Rouen: Publications de l’université de Rouen, 1997).

really seeing anything, so that her writing would be little more than a “hoax.” As a writer, Le Sueur felt tested by class struggle: “I am determined to get IN to have an experience with it, in it, and not just look at it.”¹³

For tens of thousands of workers, 1934’s “bitter, explosive episodes of ... labor struggle” were, indeed, a decisive turning point. As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. noted many years ago, the truckers’ strikes in Minneapolis, alongside the advances in Toledo and San Francisco, registered small victories within a working-class upheaval that transformed class relations and the nature of trade unionism in the United States. Saul Alinsky considered these tumultuous battles “the revolutionary handwriting on the walls of American industry.” The socio-political climate created in 1934 by mass strikes and sharp class polarization encouraged John L. Lewis to launch a serious fight for the mass-production unionism of the Congress of Industrial Organizations [CIO]. “Lewis watched the unrest and flareups of violence through the summer of 1934,” Alinsky claimed, and he could not help but notice that, “Blood ran in Minneapolis.” In the summer of 1934, Cannon and the Communist League of America found themselves at the center of this Minneapolis upheaval, in which Trotskyists led a “general strike of truck drivers into a virtual civil war.”¹⁴

2 Class Relations in Minneapolis

Entering the 1930s, Minneapolis was not known as a bastion of working-class militancy. Far from it. The first two decades of the twentieth century gave rise to a community-based socialist and radical trade union movement, infused with the combativeness of resource workers drawn to the Industrial Workers of the World. Workers won some victories, including the election of a machin-

13 Charles Rumford Walker, *American City: A Rank-and-File History* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937); Walker, “Notes for Life Story of a Truck Driver,” Box 1, File “American City: Preliminary Prospectus and General Notes,” Charles Rumford Walker Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota [hereafter CRW Papers, MNHS]; Meridel Le Sueur, “What Happens in a Strike,” *American Mercury*, 33 (September–December 1934), 329–335, also Le Sueur, *North Star Country* (New York: Dull, Sloan & Pearce, 1945), 289–297; Meridel Le Sueur, “Notebooks: Volume 8, 1934–1935,” 12–18, Box 26, Meridel Le Sueur Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota [hereafter Le Sueur Papers, MNHS].

14 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal*, Volume III (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 385–387, 394; Saul Alinsky, *John L. Lewis: An Unauthorized Biography* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1947), 72; David Milton, *The Politics of US Labor* (New York: Monthly Review, 1982), 52; Philip Dray, *There is Power in a Union: The Epic Story of Labor in America* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 433–440.

ist mayor, Thomas Van Lear, whose two-year term in 1916–18 was secured by a labor-socialist coalition. But the economic disruptions of the post-World War I reconstruction period, combined with the Red Scare of 1919–20 and a vigorous employers' offensive, brought labor's forward march in Minneapolis to an abrupt halt.¹⁵

Indicative of the changing nature of class relations in Minneapolis was the 1920 May Day parade, featuring a donkey carrying a large placard reading, "I and all my relatives work in an open shop."¹⁶ Throughout the 1920s, Minneapolis was remarkably quiescent: it was known nationally as a stronghold of opposition to unions, its reputation as an open-shop town exceeding even that of Detroit and Los Angeles. The city's anti-union employers gathered in the Citizens' Alliance, founded in the opening decade of the twentieth century. There they worked in concert to blacklist labor organizers; keep tabs on radicals; and hire spies, company guards, and strikebreakers.¹⁷

Between the early 1920s and the convulsive 1934 teamster rebellion, the Citizens' Alliance had little difficulty managing the complacent AFL craft unions, which represented less than nine per cent of the city's workers. Wage rates were low, and stayed low. While they increased nationally by eleven percent during the 1920s, in Minneapolis workers' pay packages rose a meagre two percent. Strikes were rare. Those who dared walk out soon felt the wrath of organized capital. The Alliance boasted that it was undefeated in contests with workers' organizations. Politically, the weakness of urban, organized labor in Minnesota's major productive and distributive center reduced Minneapolis to a Republican stronghold.

15 Labor in Minneapolis in the early twentieth century is discussed in Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915–1935* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 21–68; George Dimitri Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1970, 1–58; Walker, *American City*, 9–44. More on contextualizing Minneapolis class relations and political economy in the period leading up to the 1930s can be found in Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2013), 29–39.

16 E.W. Latchem, "First of May in Minneapolis," *One Big Union Monthly*, 2 (June 1920), 6–8.

17 For a general introduction to such Citizen's Alliances/Committees see Louis G. Silverberg, "Citizens' Committees: Their Role in Industrial Conflict," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 5 (March 1941), 17–37. A superb study of the Minneapolis Citizens' Alliance is William Millikan, *A Union Against Unions: The Minneapolis Citizens' Alliance and its Fight Against Organized Labor* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2001). Note, as well, Jean E. Spielman, *The Stool Pigeon and the Open Shop Movement* (Minneapolis: American Publishing Company, 1923).

A.W. Strong, a self-made man who epitomized the reactionary and aggressive capitalists who ran Minneapolis over the course of the 1920s and into the early 1930s, founded the Citizens' Alliance. He believed it to be a kind of "industrial salvation." According to Charles Rumford Walker, Strong "spoke of the labor leaders he had fought with a reserve of hatred which only strict Christians employ against willful heretics." Labor's weakness was capital's strength: "equipped with both economic power and the spirit of evangelism, the Citizens' Alliance of Minneapolis [was] no ordinary employers' organization. ... it possessed centralized committee control, a disciplined membership, a permanent staff of highly paid functionaries, the backing of the Minneapolis banks, the cooperation of the police, and one of the most thorough labor spy organizations in the country. It was a redoubtable antagonist for any rank-and-file rebellion." Small wonder that Minneapolis workers were regarded as defeated and demoralized as they entered the 1930s, the city known as "the worst scab town in the Northwest." As Cannon later observed in his *History of American Trotskyism*, "Minneapolis wasn't the easiest nut to crack. ... it was a town of lost strikes, open shops, miserably low wages, murderous hours, and a weak and ineffectual craft-union movement."¹⁸

In this context of seeming defeat, opportunities for a revival of class struggle presented themselves. The weakness of the myopic AFL craft unions created space for radical initiatives. The Industrial Workers of the World had once signed up thousands of migratory timber workers and field hands during the first quarter of the twentieth century; it left its militant stamp on Minneapolis, where older workers could recall an alternative to the American Federation of Labor. Third partyism also had deep roots in the state, particularly in rural Minnesota, where social-democratic Scandinavian immigrants embraced the agrarian populism of the World War I era Non-Partisan League. By the 1920s and 1930s this heritage was represented in the electoral support given to the Farmer-Labor Party [FLP], which galvanized significant endorsement among

18 The above paragraphs draw on Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 1-45; William Millikan, "Maintaining 'Law and Order': The Minneapolis Citizens' Alliance in the 1920s," *Minnesota History*, 51 (Summer 1989), 219-233; Millikan, *A Union Against Unions*; Lois Quam and Peter J. Rachleff, "Keeping Minneapolis an Open Shop Town: The Citizens' Alliance in the 1930s," *Minnesota History*, 50 (Fall 1886), 105-117; Philip A. Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 13-22; Walker, *American City*, 59, 84-87, 187-192; Peter Rachleff, "Turning Points in the Labor Movement: Three Key Conflicts," in Clifford E. Clark, Jr., *Minnesota in a Century of Change: The State and Its People* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1989), 205-206; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 142; Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal*, 386.

urban workers and displaced the Democratic Party as the voice of opposition to the entrenched Republicans. In 1930, 38-year old Floyd Bjorsterne Olson, proclaiming that “Minnesota Needs a Change!”, was elected the first Farmer-Labor governor in the United States. While originally insisting that he was not a “bitter radical and theorist, but a well-balanced progressive,” Olson was one of many politicians whose rhetoric shifted to the left in response to the depressed economic conditions of the early 1930s. “I am not a liberal,” he declared in 1934, “I am what I want to be – a radical.” In *American City*, Walker observed that while the influence of organized labor was “at its nadir,” there was also a “rather startling contradiction in the arena of class forces [that] existed in Minneapolis between the years 1930 and 1934. Labor by joining hands with the farmer won a measure of political power. But meantime labor’s economic power lagged.” Olson’s radical posturing, urging downtrodden workers in sectors like the trucking industry to “organize and fight for their demands,” undoubtedly lent legitimacy to class struggle.¹⁹

Further to the left of this radical populism, Minneapolis also harbored working-class revolutionaries. They would be the conscious, subjective element needed to take this context of contradictory development in bold, new directions. Again, precisely because the mainstream AFL-dominated labor movement was so weak, communists were able to exercise an important influence. Over the course of the 1920s, the Workers (Communist) Party, its members concentrated among the largely Scandinavian and German building and metal tradesmen, supported and then broke from the Farmer-Labor Association. Expelled from the body in January 1925, communists resurfaced within its ranks in 1928. Vincent Ray Dunne, not yet drummed out of the official Communist Party, was chosen as a delegate to the 1928 convention of the Farmer Labor Association, running for Congress on its ticket. Communists also presented a significant left challenge to the conservatives in the Central Labor Union [CLU], necessitating a “red purge” of the assembly in 1924. When, in November 1928, Cannon and his supporters were kicked out of the Communist International for embracing Trotsky’s critique of Stalinism, Minneapolis was a source of strength for the nascent dissident movement that would culminate in the

19 Tselos, “The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s,” 46–53, 114–172; Walker, *American City*, 59–77; Millard L. Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third-Party Alternative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979); Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); George H. Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1951); Herbert Lefkowitz, “Olson: Radical and Proud of It,” *Review of Reviews*, 91 (May 1935), 36–40, 70; Walker, *American City*, 85–87.

founding of the Communist League of America (Opposition) in 1929. By the end of November 1928, some 27 Minneapolis revolutionaries had been expelled from the Communist Party, USA. Among them were Carl Skoglund and the Dunne brothers, Vincent Ray, Miles, and Grant, all of whom would figure decisively in the 1934 labor revolt.²⁰

By 1934, the effects of economic collapse devastated Minneapolis. Hard hit by the Great Depression, the city's hinterland saw farm income more than halved between the late 1920s and 1932. Foreclosures drove families from homesteads, many of them finding their way on to crowded city relief roles. Minneapolis workers, men and women, organized and unorganized, were ravaged by the usual maladies of the era: wage cuts, job losses, stretch outs, and attacks on any and all who advocated alternatives to the uninhibited reign of capital. Within urban Hennepin County, 68,500 were unemployed by the winter of 1932–33, those dependent on public assistance swelling to 120,000 persons; in 1934 almost one in three people in Minneapolis and Hennepin County were reliant on some kind of dole.

Workers who still had jobs saw their already meagre pay cut back. In the Twin Cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul more than 60 percent of those employed took home less than \$20 weekly – well up from 28 percent in the late 1920s. Male breadwinners in the trucking sector supported families on \$12–\$18 for a work-week than stretched from 54 to 90 hours. Union membership fell by half from 1929–33, plummeting to 7,000. Many trades could not maintain the union scale of wages. Most attempts by building trades workers to strike against employer demands for longer hours and lower pay were defeated.²¹

On May Day 1930, as the depression began to bite, the Communist Party called for mass demonstrations against labor's enemies, including "agents of imperialism" like "the officialdom of the American Federation of Labor, the Farmer-Labor Party, the Socialist Party, etc." It singled out former comrades, demonizing "Trotskyites [who] have become a tail to this corrupt capitalist class bureaucracy and are carrying on the same work of attacking the working

20 Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion* (New York: Monad Press, 1972), 25–35; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 144; Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, 347–348; Korth, *Minneapolis Teamsters Strike*, 39; Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism*, 97, 111–112, 115; Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 54–55; Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 96–126; James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912–1925* (New York: Vintage, 1969), 272–323.

21 The above paragraphs draw on Meridel Le Sueur, *The Girl* (Cambridge, MA: West End, 1978 original 1939); Tselos, "The Labor Movement in Minneapolis in the 1930s," 59–113; Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle*, 21–46, 58–68; Walker, *American City*, 79–92.

class and its organization.” The Party was struggling to build Red-led Unemployed Councils and unionize production workers in the unorganized flour mills and company-union dominated meatpacking industry, but its sectarian and adventurist tactics ensured that it gained little ground.

At a 25 February 1931 Hunger Demonstration, George Powers, Trade Union Unity League Secretary in Minneapolis, and Party functionary Karl Reeve, incited a crowd of 500 jobless to storm the Gateway Meat Market. Many of the dispossessed found “secret satisfaction” in this daring and brazen act of expropriation and redistribution of food. But in undertaking the market raid, and in its actions in the aftermath of the 1931 demonstration, the Communist Party (CP) squandered any credit it had accumulated among the unemployed. Powers, Reeve, and other CPers disappeared as the crowd marched menacingly on the retail outlet, leaving three of the foot soldiers of the protest to face arrest and sentences of ninety-days in the workhouse. Earl Browder, in a curt abandonment of the jobless militants, condemned isolated “food seizures which are not approved by the masses.” Even worse, the Party’s legal arm, the International Labor Defense, refused to come to the legal aid of the arrested food rioters.

As Carl Cowl reported in *The Militant*, “chagrin was felt at the manner in which the party shamefully deserted the workers,” and those arrested “felt the bureaucrats had betrayed them.” They apparently resolved “never to be made scapegoats again.” Minneapolis’s Republican Mayor, William F. Kunze, used the 1931 Hunger Demonstration’s riotous end to rationalize repression. He banned all Communist assembly and used this edict to raid the headquarters of the Communist League of America, which eventually had to close its doors. Police also broke up Trotskyist meetings. When a movement to build a Minneapolis Central Council of the Unemployed emerged in the difficult winter of 1933–34, Stalinist sectarianism surfaced in verbal assaults on all “social fascists” connected to the mobilization, in which Vincent Ray Dunne figured prominently.

Communists did little better among established unionists. They apparently shunned the American Federation of Labor. Few new recruits were members. The Party had virtually no presence to speak of in the labor body that would figure centrally in the 1934 strikes, the largely moribund General Truck Drivers’ and Helpers’ Union Local 574 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Stablemen, and Helpers. First organized in the early 1920s, Local 574 struggled throughout the opening years of the Depression. It had a membership of approximately 75 in 1933, its activity concentrated among half-a-dozen taxi drivers who owned their own cabs and a select few coal yards. Affiliated with the larger Teamsters Joint Council, whose full-time organizer, William [Bill] S. Brown, was also the President of Local 574, the union was anything but

a hotbed of activity. Many remembered the defeat of a 1916 truckers' strike, in which the Citizens' Alliance expended \$25,000 to crush Minneapolis's teamsters. Things did not get any better in the years to come. Farrell Dobbs claimed that up to 1934 "not a single Teamster strike had been won in [Minneapolis] for some twenty years."²²

Yet however quiescent things appeared on the surface, Charles Rumford Walker suggested that Minneapolis in the early 1930's was nonetheless a "city of tension." The Citizens' Alliance was fearful that the labor provisions in Roosevelt's National Recovery Act contained "real dynamite" that might threaten their open shop town. Reactionary employers clung to the notion that Minneapolis was destined, in the words of one timber baron, to become "the greatest peasant capital in the world." They were deeply invested in making sure that the Minnesota metropole remain on this antediluvian trajectory.²³

This was a dream whose time had passed. The longstanding erosion of the resource Empire on which the open shop city's good fortunes rested was accelerated by the steep economic downturn that followed the crash of 1929. As demand for steel sputtered, orders for iron ore from the Mesabi Range fell in lockstep; lumber production had already largely shifted to the Pacific North-

22 The above paragraphs draw on "One Thousand Teamsters are Denied Rights," *Minneapolis Labor Review*, 16 June 1916; Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 88–89, 92, 99–102, citing Earl Browder, *Daily Worker*, 6 March 1931; Carl Cowl, "With the Opposition in Minneapolis," *The Militant*, 9 January 1932; William Kitt, "St. Paul Packing Strike," *The Militant*, 16 December 1933; C.F., "United Front at Minneapolis: Labor Organizations in Unemployed Fight," *The Militant*, 23 December 1933; *Minneapolis Labor Review*, 30 September 1932; Walker, *American City*, 85; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 36–39; Mayer, *Political Career of Olson*, 185. Membership estimates for Local 574 one year before the 1934 upheaval vary, with Dobbs citing the lowest figure of 75 (Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 65). The president of the Minneapolis union, William [Bill] Brown, offered his assessment of the membership as slightly larger, numbering 90, while union militant and later Socialist Workers Party member, Shaun [Jack] Maloney, estimated the dues-paying ranks at 175. Carl Skoglund noted in a 1955 interview that there were only 65 members of the General Drivers' Union in 1931. See Charles Rumford Walker, "A Militant Trade Union, Minneapolis: Municipal Profile," *Survey Graphic* (January 1937), 29, Box 1, Folder: "Newspaper clippings and magazine articles, Local 574 strike, 1934," CRW Papers, MNHS; Shaun [Jack] Maloney interviewed by Sol Salerno, Peter Rachleff, Don Seaverson, 1–4 April 1988, Oral History Interview Transcript, 72, in Shaun [Jack] Maloney Biographical File, 1911–1993, David J. Riehle Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota [hereafter Riehle Papers, MNHS]; Shaun Maloney interviewed by Martin Duffy and Chris Miller, 30 May 1979, Box 2, File: "1934 Teamsters Strike," Transcript, 1–10, in Shaun Jack Maloney Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota [hereafter Maloney Papers, MNHS]; Carl Skoglund interviewed by Fred Halstead, 25 March 1955, Transcript, 14, Box 2, Riehle Papers, MNHS.

23 Walker, *American City*, 79–92, esp. 82, 85.

west; and the opening of the Panama Canal drastically reduced the importance of the railroads that once made the Twin Cities a vital transportation hub. When the Great Depression lowered the boom on this slow economic bust, it left Minneapolis reeling. In looking at the roots of the class struggle that erupted in 1934, *Fortune* concluded that “Minneapolis has outgrown the northwest, from which it must live, and now that the days of expansion are over its classes are fighting among themselves for what is left.”

Walker made a parallel observation: “If the workers and farmers, the lumberjacks, shovel stiffs and factory operatives – rank-and-file builders of the empire – failed for the most part to share in the imperial spoil or to influence the confident policies of their masters in the period of the empire’s expansion, they began to challenge both in the period of its decline.” He noted that the depression “rapidly ripened these historic difficulties in a space of three years,” resulting in “an explosive ... spring of 1934.” Appreciating that, “A successful challenge is never made against a ruling group while it is historically young, powerful, and progressive,” Walker suggested that hegemonic capitalist interests in Minneapolis in 1934 were themselves, ironically, as backward as the labor forces that they had, for decades, been keeping under their thumb. “Consciousness of unassailable power for a generation with a slow decay of its substance left them not as persons but as an economic group both arrogant and a little stupid.”²⁴ This opened a door of opportunity to revolutionaries willing to follow a militant course of class struggle. The Third Period strategic turn of the Communist International, which the CP in Minneapolis followed with sectarian rigidity and adventurist folly, ill-suited it to adapt to the new circumstances adroitly. Indeed, the Communist Party was in some ways the mirror image of the Citizens’ Alliance, also “both arrogant and a little stupid.” These factors combined to create new possibilities of advance for the Trotskyists in Minneapolis’s Communist League of America (Opposition).

3 Trotskyists among the Teamsters: Propagandistic Old Moles

The notion that Trotskyists would lead working-class Minneapolis out of the barren desert of class quietude and the open shop and into a year of strikes and union battles for recognition in 1934 would have seemed fanciful indeed in 1930–31. And yet the seeds of conflict were germinating, all the while being

24 The above paragraphs draw on Walker, *American City*, esp. 86–87, 24; “Revolt in the Northwest,” *Fortune*, 13 (April 1936), 115–116.

cultivated by conscious if cautious agents of labor's cause. As a London costermonger told Henry Mayhew in the mid-nineteenth century: "People fancy when all's quiet that all's stagnating. Propagandism is going on for all that. It's when all's quiet that the seed's a growing." Like Marx's revolutionary old mole, the preliminary work of burrowing into the social relations of society so that transformative forces might arise and leap from their somnolence to exclaim a new social order, was thoroughgoing.²⁵

In American Left Opposition circles, the Minneapolis local was recognized as one of the League's "mainstays ... easily one of [the] best branches and ... most active units." Yet the national leadership of the CLA also had some concerns about the political reliability of the branch. An experienced Left Opposition member, C.R. Hedlund, a railway engineer, agreed to serve on the Minneapolis Mayor's class collaborationist Unemployment Relief Committee alongside various labor officials, politicians, and businessmen. Another indication of problems in the local was the apparent success of the Communist Party in besting the Left Opposition in public debate and in dominating the selection of local delegates chosen to attend a Chicago conference dedicated to freeing the political prisoner, Tom Mooney. As late as March 1933, the Minneapolis Trotskyists seemed to be paying an inordinate amount of attention to the Communist Party's municipal campaign to back a "Workers' Ticket" in the upcoming elections. And they had made little headway in their trade union work. When a sardonic employer asked Vincent Ray Dunne "how he was making out" with his efforts to organize truckers, the CLA militant replied, "truthfully that progress was almost nil."²⁶

To be sure, criticism of the Minneapolis branch in the 1931–33 years was never easily separable from the factionalism that pitted figures such as Shachtman, Spector, Abern, and Glotzer against Cannon and those who supported him. These included the bulk of the Minneapolis Trotskyists. Glotzer jumped at the chance to make factional hay out of how Vincent Ray Dunne and Carl Skoglund supposedly misdirected work in the coal yards in the winter of 1932. The Chicago National Committee member criticized the leading Minneapolis

25 Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor: The London Street Folk*, Volume 1 (New York: Dover, 1968), 20; Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress, 1968), 170.

26 See National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 20 January 1932; 18 August 1932; 24 October 1932, Box 35, Folder 6; 18 March 1933, Box 35, Folder 9, George Breitman Papers, Tamiment Institute, Bobst Library, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter GB Papers]; Dale Kramer, "The Dunne Boys of Minneapolis," *Harper's Magazine*, 184 (March 1942), 391. The Chicago Mooney Conference is discussed at length in the previous chapter and was organized on a national basis with the Communist Party very much in control.

comrades for recruiting the relatively well-remunerated truck drivers into Local 574 rather than concentrating on “the more exploited” coal yard helpers. He also chastised them for “fraternization” with the bosses, on the grounds employers were invited to attend a “stag party” or “beer bust” to celebrate the formation of a grievance committee and had even been allowed to speak, while CLA comrades held their tongues.

Skoglund countered that Glotzer was apparently unaware that in the coal yards drivers who were responsible for providing and outfitting their own trucks also hired helpers, who received a quarter of whatever was earned. Men were also employed in the yards on an hourly basis. One of the main issues in organizing the drivers, was the “demand that these workers be employed more steadily and also that the drivers refuse to load their trucks without more help.” Workers’ meetings, Skoglund insisted, were never open to the bosses, and it was only at the amusement stag that they were present. They demanded the right to speak in response to a satirical reading by Miles Dunne which “pictured the conditions of the workers.” If, as Glotzer implied should have been done, a CLA comrade had insisted on being “mechanically forced on the platform to advertise” Left Opposition politics, the result would have been “discharge of some of our comrades.”

Skoglund and Dunne explained that they were building a network of contacts “for future work,” introducing the drivers and helpers to *The Militant*, and preparing for the spring seasonal layoffs that beset those working in the coal yards. “What work was done this year will ... be borne in mind by these workers, thereby making it easier to talk organization next year,” Skoglund concluded presciently. Sam Gordon, a young Cannon protégé, recalled that he first talked to Dunne, Skoglund, and Oscar Coover in June 1932. “I remember that on parting I glowed with confidence at the prospect for their trade work and our League as a class-struggle organization.”²⁷

In 1941, *Time* observed snidely that “the big boys in Minnesota labor are three little men, the Dunne brothers.” Vincent Ray Dunne, the oldest of the three Trotskyist brothers, and often referred to as Ray, V.R., or Vince, was born in 1889

27 See Albert Glotzer, “Report on National Tour,” 11 April 1932 and Carl Skoglund to the National Committee, “The Coal Drivers in Minneapolis,” 18 April 1932, both in *Dog Days*, 205–207, 216–218. Swabeck’s correspondence to Skoglund around Glotzer’s allegations led to heated accusations of factional abuse of office on the part of Shachtman and Glotzer. See National Executive Committee, CLA, Minutes, 18 April 1932; “Statement by Albert Glotzer,” 25 April 1932, Box 35, Folder 6, GB Papers; Sam Gordon in Les Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him: By Thirty-Three Comrades, Friends, and Relatives* (New York: Pathfinder, 1976), 64. The “stag” referred to is undoubtedly the “beer bust” described by Farrell Dobbs in *Teamster Rebellion*, 48–49.

in Kansas City, Kansas. When Dunne's father, a streetcar mechanic, suffered a debilitating injury and could no longer work, the family was forced to move to a grandparents' farm near Little Falls, Minnesota. The Dunnes were a poor Irish Catholic family, but the boys drifted away from the church early in life. Ray's older brother Bill [William F.] Dunne was dressed down by the parish priest for "worldliness" and expelled from a catechism class after being caught reading Victor Hugo. This piqued his younger brother's curiosity, and Ray became an avid reader.

Ray's schoolroom, however, was the workers' movement. Forced into the labor market at the age of fourteen, he worked as a lumberjack in Montana, where he first read Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Before long he was introduced to the ideas of philosophical materialism and the politics of class struggle. Like Cannon, Dunne gravitated to the Industrial Workers of the World, and with the economic downturn of 1907 he joined many fellow Wobblies on the tramp. In Seattle he was forced to earn money to feed himself by catching rats for the nickel bounty the city offered. Not yet out of his teens, Ray was arrested in California for delivering a political speech. Later, after wandering the southwest, he did a stint in the swamps, cutting pine trees. A vagrancy charge earned Dunne time on an Arkansas chain gang, convincing him that life on the road was not for him. Returning to Minnesota, he settled in Minneapolis in 1908, where he married and raised a family which included, from time to time, a number of adopted children.

Working in a variety of jobs, most of them associated with the trucking industry, Dunne eventually joined the Socialist Party and, in 1919, gravitated to the emerging communist underground. Prodded by Bill, who would figure prominently in the upper echelons of the Party hierarchy over the course of the 1920s and was a close friend and collaborator of Cannon's, Ray joined the Workers (Communist) Party. No family bond remained as Bill and Ray parted paths in a bitter 1928 falling out over whether to side with Trotsky or Stalin. "As each considers political opinions more important than blood," one journalist wrote in 1942, "they have since referred to each other as complete strangers." When Bill was assigned the Party task of assailing his brothers' leadership of the teamsters' strikes in 1934, Ray refused to attend his hostile public harangues, letting it be known that "this Stalinist bootlicker has nothing of importance for me to hear."

Vincent Ray Dunne was well-known in 1920s Minneapolis as one of the most notorious "Reds" in the CLU and the Farmer-Labor Party. Dunne was fired from one job during World War I for refusing to buy war savings stamps. He was apparently blacklisted by the Wells-Fargo Express Company for handing out copies of the *Appeal to Reason*. But his skills as a driver and reputation as a

good worker who got along with his fellows meant that he was seldom out of work. From 1921 to 1933, Ray worked for the Delaittre-Dixon Coal Company; he started in the yards as a coal-heaving helper, but graduated to driver, dispatcher, and weighmaster. This latter position, in which Dunne assigned drivers for the delivery of fuel orders and weighed each load of coal to ascertain that it was properly fulfilled, put Dunne in contact with the company stenographers and bookkeepers, who he helped organize. This, in turn, eased him into the CLU as a delegate.

DeLaittre-Dixon, run by a scion of the old Minnesota lumber industry, had a touch of Tory paternalism running through it, and Ray's politics were tolerated, treated with bemusement. Dunne's value to the firm was undeniable; his intelligence and reliability apparently trumped his public radicalism, and the family enterprise may not have been fully aware of Ray's role in aiding in the organization of white and pink collar workers. His bosses undoubtedly saw Dunne as a trucker's advocate who, while up to no good, was achieving very little.

This enlightened complacency faded, however, as the DeLaittre-Dixon interests merged in 1933 with some smaller coal yards to form an expanded Ford Motor Company-controlled enterprise known as Fuel Distributors. After Dunne took an afternoon off to be a featured speaker at an anti-Fascist rally *and* lead an unemployed march on City Hall, the manager gave him his last paycheck and told him he was done. "This embarrasses us," the company spokesman told Dunne, "and we must let you go." From earnings that might approach \$175 monthly, Dunne was reduced to scrounging for odd jobs, dependent mostly on support from friends in the labor movement and relief. As Walker writes, at this point in time, "Probably four or five hundred workers in Minneapolis knew 'Ray' personally. Scores had worked with him in the coal yards, talked with him, eaten with him, known his wife, his brothers, and his friends. They formed their own opinions – that he was honest, intelligent, and selfless, and a damn good organizer for the truck drivers' union to have. They had always known him to be a Red; that was no news."

Deliberate, sober, unobtrusive, a respectful listener more likely to extend the analysis of others or to amplify opinions and perspectives rather than dominate a conversation, Vincent Ray Dunne could also demolish the foolhardy with mordant wit or argue down a crowd with reason, logic, and the conviction of his ideas. Resembling Humphrey Bogart, Dunne had something of the soft-spoken deliberation of the popular actor's screen persona. A regular guy who "smoked union-made cigarettes" and "was fond of the movies," the oldest of the trio of Minneapolis Dunne brothers was seen as a respected unionist "with an intimate knowledge of the coal yards" His integrity and often-

tested physical courage were admired to the point that workers would follow Dunne's lead. Ray, then, was the "big Dunne," but as a later portrait in *Harper's Magazine* would explain, "he seldom bothered to hold union office, preferring to rule by the force of his personality and the demonstrable accuracy of his judgment."²⁸

In 1936 radical journalist James Rorty described Vincent Ray Dunne as a "slightly built, leanly muscular workman in his early forties" who had the "brow and eyes of an Irish intellectual" and exuded "finely disciplined energy." Rorty tended to agree with Dunne's projection that "we were within two or three years of a decisive employer-worker show-down." Dunne also impressed left-wing literary critic, F.O. Matthiessen, as someone who "was devoted to the values of culture, and determined that the workingman should share them." Matthiessen thought Dunne "the nearest America had come to producing a Marxist in the selfless tradition of Lenin."²⁹

Vincent Ray Dunne was more often described as "the brains, the directing genius" of the organizing drive that broke the back of the open shop in Minneapolis than the "blazingest ball of fire" portrayed in *Time*. Dunne "preferred a behind-the-scenes role," which suited his two brothers who worked with him among the teamsters. They complemented Ray wonderfully. Miles [Micky/Mick] Dunne, for instance, was the most gregarious of the three Trotskyist Dunne brothers, an effective orator who enjoyed the limelight. An aspiring actor and sharp dresser, with what many considered to be dashing good looks, Mick Dunne was forced into coal driving to make a living. In time he became a union executive whose relish for the trappings of office was quite foreign to his older brother Ray. Micky mixed well with the truckers and coal yard workers, with whom he liked to share a drink and talk fishing, hunting, boxing, and football. To Micky fell the task of "buttering up" those it was considered diplomatic to appease or flatter, but he also had a "vitriolic tongue ... helpful against stubborn enemies," including his Stalinist brother Bill, whom

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- 28 The above paragraphs draw on "National Affairs: Three Little Men," *Time*, 7 July 1941; US Military Intelligence Reports: Surveillance of Radicals in the United States, 1917–1941, Reel 32, Series 2667, Seventh Corps Areas-Omaha, Nebraska, HQ, File 0248, Series 2667–53, June 1934, Minneapolis Truck Drivers Strike, "Report of J.M. Moore," 4pp; Kramer, "The Dunne Boys of Minneapolis," 388–395; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 29–30, 32, 47, 49; Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 203–207; Walker, *American City*, 160, 192–197.
- 29 James Rorty, *Where Life is Better: An Unsentimental Journey* (New York: John Day, 1936), 196; F.O. Matthiessen, *From the Heart of Europe: On a Lecture Tour of Central Europe, from July to December 1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 87–91, and for a disparaging review of Matthiessen's book, P.B. "We Note: Henry Wallace and His Followers," *Antioch Review*, 8 (Autumn 1948), 368–376.

Miles enjoyed heckling occasionally. Miles was an effective spokesperson who adeptly fulfilled a wide variety of organization functions, depending on what the situation required.

The last Dunne brother among the Minneapolis truckers, Grant, was arguably the public face of militant teamster toughness: in negotiations with bosses and bureaucrats, politicians and police, he bluffed and bellowed; on a picket line he was intrepid and resolute, with an intimidating scowl that was legendary. Wounded in World War I, Grant Dunne suffered through bouts of depression, and relied on the extroverted Miles to bring him out of his periodic despondency. Unlike Ray, he rarely picked up a book. When trouble was brewing, Grant Dunne “was of the greatest use.”³⁰

The Dunne brothers made for good mainstream press. Small, dark, and wiry, they were the archetypal 1930s labor movement “tough guys.” A Minneapolis policeman and future sheriff of Hennepin County, Ed Ryan, remembered the Dunnes as “soft spoken, gentlemanly little fellows, but tougher than hell.”³¹ Journalistic attention focused on their role in the teamster strikes of 1934. But they alone did not lead the truckers. Vitally important were two other figures, Carl [Karl/Skogie] Skoglund and William S. [Bill] Brown.

Skoglund was arguably the decisive strategist of the two.³² Equally important, he was always well-liked and respected by his workmates, who revered his intellect and his strategic good sense. Ray Dunne (five years younger), considered the husky Skogie his mentor, acknowledging his leading role in the 1934 strikes. Born the son of Swedish serfs, Skoglund came to the United States around 1911. Not yet thirty, he racked up a reputation in Sweden as a militant trade unionist and mutinous leader of a conscripted soldiers’ protest. Blacklisted for his activism, he fled the Old World for the New, hoping to find work. He

30 Kramer, “The Dunne Boys of Minneapolis,” 388–398; Valeyly, *Radicalism in the States*, 104–105, 116.

31 “National Affairs: Three Little Men,” *Time*, 7 July 1941; Ryan quoted in Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 116.

32 Jack Maloney stresses Skoglund’s preeminent role in developing the strategy of how best to organize truckers in Minneapolis in 1934 and, later in the 1930s, throughout the north-west in the interstate campaigns led by Farrell Dobbs. Among the Minneapolis Trotskyists, Maloney regarded Skoglund as “the grand old man of the bunch.” See Maloney interviewed by Martin Duffy and Chris Miller, 30 May 1979, Transcript, 1–10, Box 2, File “1934 Teamsters Strike,” Maloney Papers, MNHS; Maloney interviewed by Sakerno, Rachleff, and Seaverson, 1–4 April 1988, Transcript, 65–76, 88; 5–9 April, Transcript, 123–125, in Maloney Biographical File, 1911–1999, Box 1, Riehle Papers, MNHS. Also File: “Skoglund-Weissman Interviews, undated,” and File: “Skoglund-Halstead Interview, 1955,” Box 2, Riehle Papers, MNHS; Skoglund Centenary Committee, *Carl Skoglund, 1884–1960: Remembered in Struggle* (Minneapolis: Skoglund Centenary Committee, 1984).

brought with him to the United States the politics of Scandinavian social democracy, but he originally lacked sufficient language skills in English to challenge the arbitrary dictates of the railway camp bosses who barked orders as Skoglund laid ties for the Northern Pacific. Fed up with the foreman's autocracy, Skoglund packed up his meagre belongings and moved into lumberjacking. A falling pine tree crushed his foot, ending his timber working days and leaving Skoglund bed-ridden for nine months. Thereafter the lumbering Swede walked with a decided limp. Having used his period of convalescence and recovery to refine his English, Skoglund moved to Minneapolis. He found work at the Pullman yards, drew on his early apprenticed training as a skilled worker, and eventually qualified as a first-class mechanic earning relatively high wages. A good part of his income was expended on workers' causes, generosity to work-mates in need, and Skoglund's growing library of radical tracts.

Skoglund was elected district chairman of the shopmen's strike committees in the losing rail strikes of 1919 and 1922. After the shattering defeat in 1922, a company union was set up and Skoglund and other prominent militants were blacklisted. He made his way to the coal yards and worked there as a driver, employed by the same firm for nine years.

Always aligned with the revolutionary movement, Skoglund was a member of the rww, but also affiliated with the Socialist Party's Scandinavian Federation, becoming its state Chairman in 1917. With other left-wingers, he gravitated to communism, and became a founding member of the Workers' Party in 1921. Over the course of the 1920s, he was a leading Minneapolis member of the Workers (Communist) Party, a left-wing delegate to the Central Labor Union. Nationally, he knew of Cannon and his caucus, of course, but he was more often aligned with William Z. Foster. When Cannon and others were expelled from the Party in 1928 for embracing Trotskyism, Skoglund, like Vincent Ray Dunne, demanded that the Party explain itself. Expulsion followed. An outcast among the long marginalized "Reds" of known Minneapolis revolutionaries, Skoglund settled into the coal yards, another Trotskyist mole among the teamsters.³³

The burrowing was anything but easy. Trying to move the American Federation of Labor General Drivers' Local 574 to action was difficult work. It was bad

33 Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 202–203; US Military Intelligence Reports: Surveillance of Radicals in the United States, 1917–1941, Reel 32, Series 2667, Seventh Corps Areas-Omaha, Nebraska, HQ, File 0248, Series 2667–53, June 1934, Minneapolis Truck Drivers Strike, "Report of J.M. Moore," 4pp; Walker, *American City*, 30–32; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 30–33. On the 1922 shopmen's strike see Colin J. Davis, *Power at Odds: The 1922 National Railroad Shopmen's Strike* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

enough that Skoglund, who briefly secured a position on the Executive Board of 574, advocated an organizing campaign to bring new members into the wilting local sometime in 1930–31. When he suggested organizing all the yard workers rather than admitting into the union only the drivers and their paid helpers, he was chastened for stepping outside the bounds of national teamster policy. Word spread that Skoglund was a “radical troublemaker.” Local 574’s conservative business agent, Cliff Hall, may have refused to accept dues from him and, fed up, Skoglund even withdrew from the General Drivers’ Union for a time, disgusted with the behavior of the local IBT leadership. For their part, these trade union functionaries branded the revolutionary Swede “a red, IWW, communist, and a disrupter of the movement.” But it was not possible to freeze Skoglund out. As Harry DeBoer later recalled: “He was generous and a nice fellow and most of the fellas knew him and if he asked you to join a union, you pretty much had to. You knew he was serious about it. He understood what the workers would have to face.” Skogie continued to talk union among the men; they listened. One autumn morning in 1933, Skoglund was warned by his employer that if he continued to foment discord among fellow coal drivers, he would no longer be on the payroll. “After that I said to myself, I got to put on my fighting clothes and organize a union here,” Skoglund later said. “Even if you are a revolutionist and know what it’s all about, you’re apt to put things off. Well, right now I couldn’t, or I’d be out on my ear.”³⁴

It was at this point that the Trotskyists among the teamsters joined up with Bill Brown. This proved a boon for the Left Opposition, now aligned with an established union leader who was developing “sound class instinct.” Brown’s history, throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s, was one of going along with the local IBT leadership, and he acquiesced in the red-baiting of Skoglund in 1931. Eventually, however, he turned away from Cliff Hall, tiring of the routinized refusal to organize the trucking industry. As Brown committed himself more and more to the cause of the teamster rank-and-file, he blossomed as a militant, class struggle, leader. Farrell Dobbs described him as “a fighter by nature and a gifted speaker, one of the best mass agitators I ever heard.” Maloney recalled that Brown, who liked to drink almost as much as he enjoyed delivering his famous one-liners against the bosses, was “an agitational speaker

34 Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 40–43, 47, 62; Walker, *American City*, 88–89; DeBoer quoted in Korth, *Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 60. On the conservative, cautious obstructions of Cliff Hall, see Maloney interviewed by Duffy and Miller, 30 May 1979, Transcript, 12–13; 4 June 1979 interview, Transcript, Box 2, File: “1934: Teamsters Strike,” Maloney Papers, MNHS; Skoglund interviewed by Halstead, 29 March 1955, Transcript, 15, Box 2, Riehle Papers, MNHS.

out of this world ... could really whip things up." As Cannon said, somewhat tongue in cheek, Brown being on the ground as a Minneapolis truckers' leader was "a fortunate circumstance. ... Fortune favors the godly. If you live right and conduct yourself properly, you get a lucky break now and then."³⁵

Ray Dunne and Skoglund tried diligently to secure a lucky break for the truckers and coal yard workers for some time. They basically worked in tandem inside the Central Labor Union for many years. Dunne was the public face of the agitational duo, largely because he was an American citizen and Skoglund, an immigrant, lacked official documentation. They thought through the necessity of organizing the trucking industry in Minneapolis, hatching plans even before their expulsion from the Communist Party late in 1928. Unlike many other labor movement figures in Minneapolis, they recognized the decisive role that the transportation sector's unorganized 4,000 drivers played in the economic life of the city. With Dunne's ties to truckers and the coal yards consolidated before his firing in 1933, and Skoglund and Miles Dunne working in the General Drivers' Local 574, the groundwork for a breakthrough was laid as early as 1931. Skoglund purchased a truck and Mick Dunne had a battered-up vehicle that he shared with a couple of buddies. Grant Dunne, thrown out of work as a plumbing estimator, also managed with Ray's help to get hired as a coal driver. Over the next three years, the DeLaittre-Dixon Fuel yard became a centerpiece of underground union activity. As Ray Dunne recalled: "In the yard we were in, I think it was seven to ten different people that were quite well known to myself. Some of them were members of the party, some were not [but it] ... was very carefully handled. ... [I]t took us three years to do it."

The formation of a volunteer organizing committee, in which the three Dunne brothers, Skoglund, and Martin Soderberg were the initial recruits, was eventually supplemented as Farrell Dobbs, Harry DeBoer, Kelly Postal and others joined. Some of these pro-union forces were brought into contact with the Dunes and Skoglund after the DeLaittre-Dixon merger created the larger enterprise and amalgamated a number of coal yards. But as Ray Dunne later insisted, the Executive Board of Local 574 wanted no part of these militants: "We tried to get into 574. They didn't want us in there, because they had a couple of drivers and one coal yard: that's all they wanted. They said, come one at a

35 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 144; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 54; Maloney interviewed by Salerno, Rachleff, Seaverson, 1–4 April 1988, Transcript, 83–85, 88, 115, Box 1, Maloney Biographical File, 1911–1999, Riehle Papers, MNHS; Maloney interviewed by Duffy and Miller, 16 August 1979, Transcript, 13–14, Box 2, File: "1934 Teamsters Strike," Maloney Papers, MNHS.

time with your problems. We'll take care of them in the Union. You pay your dues. They weren't for organizing all the inside workers; they were afraid of all of our people."

According to Ray Dunne, "Bill Brown was opposed to the executive committee of 574 who was opposed to taking us in. He hated them for that." Appointed an International Organizer by Teamster boss Dan Tobin in 1933, Brown's inclinations as "a cop-fighting, roistering truck driver who, on the side, was president of the puny teamsters' local" eventually clashed with those of his boss. Tobin valued paid-up dues and rank-and-file deference. He distrusted militants and change, and was the International Brotherhood's far-off voice of organizational temporizing and timidity. The IBT head, according to militants like Skoglund and Maloney, was especially hostile to communism, which he saw as destructive of "the Church, Mass, the beads, and the good Father" Tobin seldom got word of a strike he did not want to squelch, and Maloney later quipped that, "Tobin would give up his wife rather than give up strike benefits, and he thought a lot of his wife." A classic self-conscious labor aristocrat, Tobin "would rather wear a business suit and negotiate over a leg of a chicken, than on a picket line on a street." Brown came to appreciate that if the teamsters of Minneapolis were to advance, it would almost certainly be over Tobin's objections.³⁶

Brown, while far more militant than his conservative colleagues on Local 574's Executive Board, was a committed Farmer-Laborite, whose politics were far closer to the mainstream than his new found Trotskyist associates. Yet he appreciated the quiet, clandestine organizing of Dunne and Skoglund. "I decided to work with a few men in the union who knew *how* to organize," Brown recalled a few years later, "They were the Dunne boys, who were working in the coal yards at the time, and Karl Skoglund. Conditions were lousy and there was plenty of sentiment for a union." Brown gave his surreptitious blessings to the organizing effort in the spring of 1933, and gradually won over Local 574's Vice-President, George Frosig.

A union was crystallizing from the bottom up, in spite of AFL foot-dragging. By the fall of 1933 the organizing committee established a substantial network among the coal heavers and disgruntled drivers and their helpers. Wage

36 Above paragraphs draw on Korth, *Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 53–56, 74, which contains much direct interview quotation from Vincent Ray Dunne and others; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 144–145; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 54–56; Kramer, "The Dunne Boys of Minneapolis," 392; Dray, *Power in a Union*, 433; Skoglund interviewed by Halstead, 25 March 1955, Transcript, 14, 29; 29 March 1955, Transcript, 15; 23 April 1955, Transcript, 21–22, all in Box 2, Riehle Papers, MNHS; Maloney interviewed by Duffy and Miller, 30 May 1979, Transcript, 10–11; 24 July 1979, Transcript, 18–21, Box 2, File: "1934 Teamsters Strike," Maloney Papers, MNHS.

demands and wider aspirations were becoming staples of conversations among the workers. Teamster wages actually worsened under the National Recovery Act's code minimums, with 40 cents an hour becoming standard over the course of a work week where hours were often cut back. This resulted in weekly wage reductions, as \$16.00 became a new, and lower, standard. For the first time in the history of the Minneapolis truckers, moreover, a push for unionization included all workers in the industry, drivers and their helpers as well as the hourly-paid shovel men in the yards.

Dunne and Skoglund weighed the options and decided to proceed with deliberation and caution. They kept the lid on militant talk of job action at the end of the coal season in 1933, when some in the yards wanted to strike in protest against Dunne being fired. But the timing was all wrong. Walking out when orders for fuel were tapering off, the Left Oppositionists rightly argued, would only play into the hands of the employers. Correspondence from Tobin to the Minneapolis business agent continued to erect roadblocks to slow the momentum of the union drive. The International was especially adamant that strike action was not to be entered into without exhausting all other avenues of negotiation. Nonetheless, the "door had been opened ... a crack; it would take the pressure of the coal workers to push it wide open."³⁷

4 January Thaw; February Cold Snap: The Coal Yards on Strike

In November 1933, *The Militant* reported that membership in Local 574 was on the upswing, having quadrupled since September. Communist League of America speakers were increasingly active, with National Executive Committee member Arne Swabeck delivering a number of talks in Minneapolis in early November 1933 and branch members C.R. Hedlund, William Kitt, and Oscar Coover speaking at Left Opposition Open Forums in January 1934. Subscrip-

37 The above paragraphs draw on Walker, *American City*, 89; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 54–57; Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 208–210; Miles Dunne, "Story of 544," *Northwest Organizer*, 27 February 1941. The conservative American Federation of Labor response to developments in the Minneapolis trucking industry, which included three strikes, the culmination of which was the massive July – August 1934 work stoppage discussed below, has historically been one of understating the significance of these momentous class struggles. See, as one example, the official AFL state history of labor, George W. Lawson, *History of Labor in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota State Federation of Labor, 1955), 117–118, which reduces the history covered in this chapter to one restrained paragraph.

tions to *The Militant* were increasing, and Minneapolis readers of the Trotskyist newspaper apparently outnumbered all other CLA strongholds save for New York City.³⁸

What kept workers in the coal yards on the job? All talk turned on the weather. Normally the coldest month of the year, January in Minneapolis seldom saw the mercury rise above freezing. Yet in 1933–34, the winter was unseasonably warm. January temperatures averaged 39 degrees Fahrenheit, and a late month thaw produced spring-like conditions. Nobody was ordering coal for their slumbering furnaces. Company practices added the insult of idleness to the already long-established injury of low wages and long hours. By hiring surplus, individually-owned rigs and paying drivers on commission and carry-men by the ton of coal hauled in heavy baskets to the bins of specific customers, employers exacerbated an already deteriorating situation. As drivers, helpers, and shovel-men awaited assignment in the yard's "doghouse," a heated shack in which men gathered to play cards and grouse about their conditions, the air was thick with grievance. Throughout the trucking industry, whether it be in the grocery or taxi sectors, workers were being mercilessly squeezed into destitution. Many working in transport had to go on the public relief rolls in order to provide for their families. Across the country, moreover, labor seemed on the march. Emboldened by the seeming guarantees of the National Industrial Recovery Act [NIRA] in which Section 7 (A) ostensibly provided the right to organize a union, workers were joining the AFL, striking for rights and improvements. In practice, the NIRA delivered little, and in Minneapolis as in other centers, Regional Labor Boards were established to lower the rising antagonism of class hostilities. These Boards did what they could to avert strikes, but in Minneapolis they were confounded by the ideological rigidity of the Citizens' Alliance, which claimed that all "bargaining" with labor must take place by individual workers discussing employment conditions with the employer. In the coal yards, the Dunne brothers and Carl Skoglund worked hard to prevent a premature outbreak as strike talk grew more and more agitated.³⁹

38 Cee-Kay, "Minneapolis Branch in Action," *The Militant*, 11 November 1933; Cee-Kay, "Swabeck Meetings in Minneapolis," *The Militant*, 18 November 1933; "Minneapolis Open Forum," *The Militant*, 30 December 1933; "569 Subs!" *The Militant*, 10 February 1934.

39 Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 58–61; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 49–53. See the important arguments in James Gray Pope, "The Western Pennsylvanian Coal Strike of 1933, Part I: Lawmaking from Below and the Revival of the United Mine Workers," *Labor History*, 44 (2003), 15–48; Rebecca Zietlow and James Gray Pope, "The Toledo Auto-Lite Strike and the Fight Against 'Wage Slavery,'" *University of Toledo Law Review*, 38 (2007), 839–854.

Twenty years later, Skoglund recalled how the Trotskyist nucleus in the coal yards pressured Local 574's reluctant Executive Board to request approval for strike action from the International, knowing that denial would be their answer. There was also a call for a leaflet to be issued and distributed setting a definite date for a mass meeting of all coal drivers and yard men, the topic of discussion to be the organization of an industrial union in the trucking sector. A campaign to get Miles Dunne placed on the IBT payroll, so that he could make arrangements for a large rally and get the ball rolling by preparing a flyer announcing the event, was also initiated. With Brown and Frosig supporting these initiatives inside the Executive of Local 574, things moved quickly. Six hundred workers out of 1,000 employed in the coal yards showed up for a boisterous meeting on the first Friday of February 1934. Local IBT bureaucrats did their best to dampen spirits by declaring, "If you go on strike, you would be defeated before you start." Skoglund observed that it was "necessary to steel the ranks for a real battle against, not only the companies, but also against the bureaucrats and to educate them as to the nature of these bureaucrats." Hundreds of workers who had come to the meeting expecting to join the union were dismayed as they witnessed Teamster officials use procedural methods to block motions in favor of organizing the coal yards and building for a strike. As frustrated rank-and-file workers littered the floor of the meeting with torn-up union application cards and membership books, the dissident volunteer organizing committee finally managed to get the assembly to endorse another meeting, to be convened in two days' time, on Sunday afternoon. The Trotskyists correctly anticipated that "no bureaucrats would be present at the meeting, since they only work[ed] the regular week." Sunday's gathering, less well attended than its predecessor, but not so decidedly curbed, unanimously endorsed a city-wide strike.⁴⁰

The time for job action was right. A cold snap dropped temperatures well below freezing, and orders for coal began to pile up. Local 574, its demands long established, voted to strike on 7 February 1934 unless the companies recognized the union. There were numerous other demands, but forcing the bosses to deal with the union was to be the central issue throughout months of ensuing battles. J.B. Beardslee of the Pittsburgh Coal Company, who spoke for a group of the most intransigent employers, declined to even meet with Bill Brown at the offices of the Regional Labor Relations Board. "Mr. Brown means just exactly nothing to me," snorted Beardslee contemptuously. If some of the coal yard

40 Skoglund interviewed by Halstead, 23 April 1955, Transcript, 22–23, Box 2, Riehle Papers, MNHS; "Fight with Tobin and Teamsters' Joint Council," in File: "American City: Minnesota Miscellaneous Notes (2)," 11 Page Typescript, Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS.

owners were less bellicose, Beardslee and other Citizens' Alliance stalwarts nonetheless managed to thwart any possibility of the companies meeting with union representatives.

Brown and Local 574 had no choice but to strike, but they did so with a wily minimalism. They let it be known that they demanded only that the union was to be the agent of its declared members who worked on the trucks and in the coal yards. Workers who were not part of the union would be free to bargain with employers themselves, and there was no demand that all workers in the industry be unionized. Local 574 presented itself as the public voice of flexibility, reason and compromise, painting its opponents among the coal operators into the corner of shrill and intransigent ideologues. With the Regional Labor Relations Board seemingly powerless to cajole the coal companies to even meet with union representatives, class relations in February 1934 were shaping up as an out-and-out battle between capital and labor.⁴¹

Dunne and Skoglund were well aware that a victory for the insurgent coal yard workers would strike a powerful blow against Minneapolis as an open shop town. Bill Brown summed up the situation: "if we win it will be like a red flag to a bull. The workers will come to us and we can organize the whole damn industry." Dunne and Skoglund, their preparations for the strike careful and well-thought out, put the workers in a strong position. March was approaching and the coal season about to end; orders needed to be filled, and dispatched by truckers and their helpers if the companies were to be paid. Finally, Dunne and Skoglund knew what the coal barons and their anti-union Alliance brothers-in-arms did not believe: they actually had the workers in the yards behind them.⁴²

The organization of the strike was exemplary, Walker describing it three years later in his *American City* as "surprisingly detailed and painstaking." Before the workers walked off the job, the leaders left their trucks locked inside the coal yards. Picket captains received a map of the fuel distributors in the city and mimeographed instructions outlining their tasks and responsibilities as strike leaders. Because the coal yards were spread over ten square miles of territory, and included dozens of individual enterprises, stationary picket lines were restricted to the largest depots, with a skeletal presence at the other, more marginal, yards. Telephone contact was arranged between those posted at the coal docks and the centralized strike committee. Picket captains were entrusted to make necessary on-the-spot decisions as circumstances changed.

41 Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 61–63.

42 Walker, *American City*, 89–92; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 64.

A rank-and-file unionist suggested that these mass pickets be supplemented by a "cruising picket squad," composed of teams of four or five strikers who would patrol the coal yards and delivery routes in cars and trucks, awaiting instructions from the strike leadership as to any coal being moved through the streets of Minneapolis. At least one member of each of these "flying squads" was thoroughly familiar with the operation of a coal truck. Tracking down the strikebreaking delivery units, flying pickets would then be able to jump on the running board, reach inside the cab, pull the emergency brake, and occupy the driver in "warning" conversation. A second striker then engaged the dump lever, depositing the load of coal in the middle of the street. If the scab driver proved particularly obnoxious, his truck might be commandeered and his load of coal taken to a working-class neighborhood where it would be deposited with the understanding that needy scavengers could make off with the hijacked fuel in short order.

Within three hours of the strike being called, 65 of the 67 coal yards in Minneapolis had been closed up "as tight as a bull's eye in fly time" and 150 coal dispatching offices were shut down. A local newspaper reported that, "not a wheel is turning." Routes into and out of nearby St. Paul were sealed and the "well organized, mobile, fighting picket line ... swept the streets clear of scabs." Relief coal deliveries were run out of one coal yard, sanctioned by the union, which appointed its own weighmasters, including Ray Dunne. Local 574 provided the drivers and picket escorts, all paid at union rates, the dispatching done under written authority of the General Drivers' organization. In this way, relief recipients, the Orphans' Home, and municipal hospitals received their necessary heating supplies, but "the Strike Committee had complete command of the machinery of coal distribution in the City." As Dunne wrote to *The Militant*, "The methods used and the manner in which the organization work was carried out, stands as a model for the benefit of those who will take up the vast work that lies just ahead."⁴³

The audacity and effectiveness of the Dunne-Skoglund-Brown strike leadership rallied the mass of previously unaffiliated drivers and helpers to the

43 The above paragraphs draw on Vincent Ray Dunne, "Coal Yard Workers Win Strike in Minneapolis," *The Militant*, 24 February 1934; *Minneapolis Journal*, 7 February 1934; Walker, *American City*, 90; Tselos, "The Labor Movement in Minneapolis in the 1930s," 210–211; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 56; Mayer, *Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 189. Maloney later claimed that it was Harry DeBoer who developed the roving pickets; Maloney interviewed by Duffy and Miller, 4 June 1979, Transcript, 15, Box 2, File: "1934 Teamsters Strike"; Box 4, Files: "Minneapolis Teamster Strikes" and "Miscellaneous Notes and Clippings, 1940s–1980s," Maloney Papers, MNHS.

cause of Local 574. According to one driver, who recalled being initiated into the clandestine ranks of the union by Carl Skoglund, the vote to strike was taken by a mere 34 coal yard workers. Yet when the strike commenced on 7 February 1934, hundreds of workers participated in the walkout. Nightly meetings kept the strikers' morale high. Forty years later truck driver Chris Moe exclaimed: "we went out and tied up the town. I just got like a fanatic, like a religion. I didn't care what happened."

Insisting that only 150–200 workers were on strike, the companies perhaps believed they could get coal deliveries back on track by agreeing to a Regional Labor Relations Board mediated settlement, in which a modest wage hike was granted if they did not have to meet formally with Local 574's representatives. The companies wanted to reduce the issue of union recognition to a perfunctory acknowledgement that the General Drivers' Union now commanded the support of a number of their employees. Indeed, W.W. Hughes, Executive Secretary of the Minneapolis-St. Paul Regional Labor Board, negotiated the terms on which the coal yard owners could save face by coming out of the strike defeat with their anti-union principles largely intact. The coal dealers threw in the towel after two-and-a-half days, but the concessionary rag, as Dunne, Skoglund, and Brown well knew, had been tossed in their face. No contract would be signed, the employers retained the right to hire and fire, and all coal yard workers were to be "engaged, retained, or discharged solely on the basis of merit."

And yet for Local 574, a victory of sorts had been achieved. Wages increased slightly, but more importantly Dunne insisted, "workers have demonstrated their power. They have forced recognition of the union while ON STRIKE, a victory of no mean proportions, in the present state of the local drivers' unions." Given the continuing intransigence of the open shop bosses and the objective necessity of organizing all workers in the trucking industry, Dunne acknowledged that the brief February 1934 coal yard strike did not gain a lot. But the combination of rank-and-file militancy and effective leadership signaled that the open shop era in Minneapolis was drawing to a close. The winter walkout proved something of a "whirlwind ... battle which electrified the whole city and tied up every coal yard tight as a drum." Miles Dunne reported to the Central Labor Union, on behalf of a strike committee composed of himself, Bill Brown, Carl Skoglund, and the now enthusiastic (but formerly reluctant) teamster business agent, Cliff Hall. The coal yard strike, Miles Dunne insisted, made it clear that American workers were willing to fight for their rights. "A week ago Minneapolis was not paying much attention to the coal drivers," the official organ of the CLU, the *Minneapolis Labor Review*, proclaimed, "Today organized and militant they are a mighty factor in the industrial world." Eager to jump

on the bandwagon, a slew of trade union skates gushed about the prospects of working-class mobilization. One of them characterized Skoglund, previously regarded as a pariah, as “the General.”⁴⁴

5 Lessons of the Coal Yards Strike

The February 1934 strike was an education in the class struggle. Among the “Things the Minneapolis Coal-Yard Workers Won’t Forget,” Vincent Ray Dunne listed:

dumping of coal in front of notorious anti-union yards; militant confrontations with police; mass picketing as a reality, not just “an empty slogan”; the dramatic growth in union membership; and the shutdown of coal transport in Minneapolis during the work stoppage. Dunne also stressed the importance of support from other teamsters, especially the 1200-member Ice Wagon Drivers’ Union, which, “in spite of their officials, decided to go out in sympathy.”

Cannon later pointed out that none of the Minneapolis Trotskyists on the “Organizing Committee” were officers of the union. They were “a sort of extra-legal body set up for the purpose of directing the organization campaign,” whose conduct of the strike took place “virtually over the head of the official leadership of the union.” Farrell Dobbs described it as “a situation of dual leadership ... taking place within the changing union.” In early January 1934, when Bill Brown tested the waters with Dan Tobin, head of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, he was advised against any walkout and reminded of how tough the employers were, particularly as they could count on support from the police and the courts. Prior to Brown directing inquiries to IBT headquarters, Tobin communicated with Central Labor Union figures, pressuring them to twist the arm of Local 574’s leadership and get it to clean its house of communists and their sympathizers. A month later, Cliff Hall and Bill Brown wrote to Tobin on 5 February 1934, informing him of the imminence of a strike and asking for official endorsement. Tobin’s assistant replied on 7 February 1934, stressing the need to work with the Roosevelt Administration to get the coal

44 Vincent Ray Dunne, “Coal Yard Workers Win Strike in Minneapolis,” *The Militant*, 24 February 1934; *Minneapolis Labor Review*, 16 February 1934; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 61–67, 76–78; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 56–57; Skoglund interviewed by Halstead, 23 April 1955, Transcript, 24, Box 2, Riehle Papers, MNHS.

dealers to meet with union representatives. Tobin refused to support the coal yard workers on the grounds that, "these men have not been members of your organization for six months," and were therefore ineligible for "strike benefits."

By the time that Tobin's missive reached Minneapolis the strike was well underway, its effectiveness established, and a settlement in the offing. Less than a week later, the Regional Labor Relations Board-ordered elections demonstrated that the union had the support of a large majority of the coal drivers and shovel men. Of the 900 workers eligible to vote (according to lists provided by the employers), 780 cast ballots, with 600 voting to join Local 574. This display of strength restrained the coal dealers from laying off or firing union activists en masse. They did blacklist some of the leading militants, but this only added committed bodies to the ranks of a newly invigorated General Drivers' Organizing Committee. Many of the new union recruits were young men, schooled by the Dunnes and Skoglund in the basics of class struggle. As Local 574 grew, so too did the Minneapolis branch of the Communist League of America: between February and May 1934, its ranks doubled from about 30 to over 60.

One of the leading activists in the coal yards strike, and a recent convert to Trotskyism, was Farrell Dobbs, a 27-year old militant whose aspirations to study political science and law at the University of Minnesota sank in the economic collapse of the 1930s. Dobbs, who worked for one of the most recalcitrant anti-union yards, the Pittsburgh Coal Company, first contemplated labor organization as he heaved coal with Grant Dunne on a November afternoon in 1933. Within weeks he was part of the small group around the Dunne brothers and Carl Skoglund who formulated what would be the initial demands of the General Drivers' Union: recognition of Local 574; increased wages; shorter hours; premium pay for overtime; job protection through a seniority system; and improved working conditions. From that point on Dobbs was a marked man to the coal operatives, and he would be one of those victimized in the aftermath of the February strike. "I was among those who got the ax in coal," Dobbs later remembered, but he promptly teamed up with Carl Skoglund, who taught him the ropes of labor organizing and introduced him to the politics of the Communist League. According to a jaundiced military intelligence report, Dobbs was "not particularly bright, but is a blind follower of the Dunne Brothers. He considers himself one of the 'tough boys' in the organization."

Ray Dunne offered an assessment of what had been accomplished by the coal yard workers in February 1934: "The bosses had to swallow their insolent slander that 'the men can't organize', 'they can't stick' – they saw UNION organization – they saw them STICK – more than that, they saw them FIGHT." In the

months to come Local 574's ranks swelled as workers in the trucking industry turned up at weekend union socials or Sunday night forums, button-holed a 574 representative, paid their dues, and asked impatiently when they would be going on strike. By the end of April 1934, some 2,000–3,000 workers in the broad trucking sector were sporting Local 574 buttons. Another round in the Minneapolis class war was in the making.⁴⁵

6 Strike Preparations: Unemployed Agitations and Industrial Unionism

With the coal yards strike settled, Minneapolis Trotskyists lent their support to the city's upholsterers, whose uphill fight to secure union recognition stalled in the morass of Labor Board "negotiations." According to *The Militant*, the upholsterers were betrayed by AFL officials and bogged down by New Deal obfuscations. "The outcome to date has demonstrated the inadequacy, the hopeless futility, of the begging tactics of the local's leaders in all previous struggle," wrote Carl Feingold from Minneapolis. Feingold was especially unimpressed by the union bureaucrats. Their "dickerings with employers through politicians and lawyers," only revealed the impotence of relying upon a 'legal defense' instead of militant class struggle. As "court cases and injunctions" overwhelmed the upholsterers, the union leaders' "failure to maintain mass picketing consistently when experience showed that as often as it was used gains were

45 The above paragraphs draw on: Vincent Ray Dunne, "Things the Minneapolis Coal-Yard Workers Won't Forget," *The Militant*, 24 February 1934; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 63–67; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 144–145; Mayer, *Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 189; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 56–57, 62; Dobbs, *Teamster Politics*, 37–41, with quote on dual leadership, 41; Farrell Dobbs, "Funeral Address," *Northwest Organizer*, 9 October 1941; "The Coal Strike of 1934 – Birth of a Great Union," *Northwest Organizer*, 24 February 1934; 3 March 1934; Smemo, "Politics of Labor Militancy in Minneapolis," 24–25, quoting Tobin to Brown, 6 January 1934; Tobin to Local 574, 6 January 1934; Tobin to Roy Weir, 4 January 1934, all in "Minneapolis Teamsters Strike, 1934: Selected Documents, 1928–1941," Microfilm 594, Minnesota Historical Society, Manuscript Collection, St. Paul, Minnesota; Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 211–214; Walker, *American City*, 89–92; Miles Dunne, "Story of 544," *Northwest Organizer*, 27 February 1941; Kramer, "The Dunne Boys of Minneapolis," 392; Vally, *Radicalism in the States*, 105–107; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 234; Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, 24–25. On the blacklisting of Dobbs see Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 17–21, 62; US Military Intelligence Reports: Surveillance of Radicals in the United State, 1917–1941, Reel 32, Series 2667, Seventh Corps Areas – Omaha, Nebraska, HQ, File 0348, Series 2667–53, June 1934, Minneapolis Truck Drivers Strike, "Report of J.M. Moore," 4pp.

made by the workers” highlighted the failed promise of AFL conservatism. Feingold thought the upholsterers imbroglio a sad illustration of where illusions in Roosevelt’s New Deal would lead.⁴⁶

February’s drop in temperature not only strengthened the coal yard workers’ hand. It also precipitated an uprising of the unemployed. In dire need of heating fuel, Minneapolis families on municipal relief besieged the city’s Public Welfare Department, demanding “emergency orders” for food and coal. Court house demonstrations culminated in a “near-riot” and the arrest of one protester; the unemployed movement, seemingly dormant, was given “a new lease on life.” The Communist Party’s Unemployed Councils revived, but a broader united front movement – the Minneapolis Central Council of Workers [MCCW] – was also launched with the support of local unions and co-operatives, as well as the Socialist Party, the Farmer-Labor Party, and the CLA. With the purpose of coordinating the struggles of both the employed and unemployed workers, the MCCW began, in February 1934, to discuss concrete actions and plan a conference.⁴⁷

It proved difficult for the MCCW to crack the hegemony of the Communist-led Unemployed Councils and their umbrella organization, the United Relief Workers Association [URWA], which dominated militant struggles of the jobless in Minneapolis.⁴⁸ The revolt of the unemployed peaked in the first week of April 1934, as mass demonstrations led by the URWA challenged the city’s Welfare Board and attacked “the starvation program of the Roosevelt NRA administration.” Protesting the ending of the Civic Works Administration [CWA], which provided jobs and wages for the unemployed, and its replacement with a “scheme of work relief on a pauper basis,” huge crowds gathered at the Minneapolis Court House. They demanded a 40 percent increase in relief rates; continuation of the CWA on a cash basis; no forced labor programs; and immediate support for all dismissed CWA workers.

At one ensuing battle, police and protesters clashed. Tear gas canisters rained down on the crowd, only to be thrown back, crashing through the windows of the Court House, where the City Council was meeting to hear the demands of a Committee of 23 leaders of the angry unemployed. The entire Committee was eventually arrested, as were many others, charged with dis-

46 C.F., “Mpls. Labor Notes,” *The Militant*, 24 February 1934.

47 C.F., “Mpls. Labor Notes,” *The Militant*, 24 February 1934. For a discussion of American Federation of Labor activities around unemployment in the 1930–34 period see Lawson, *History of Labor in Minnesota*, 415–463.

48 For brief comment on the Communist-led unemployed movement see Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle*, 64–66.

orderly conduct. Official reports indicated seven workers and eight police sustained injuries. The Trotskyists in the MCCW tried to intervene in these events, but were largely rebuffed by the sectarian leadership of the URWA, which preferred to denounce all of those who opposed their policy of organizing the unemployed in a "united front from below," bypassing direct connections with established trade unions and non-Communist Party workers' organizations. As CLA member William Kitt noted in *The Militant*:

The Minneapolis Central Council of Workers has as its corner stone the idea that the interests of the organized and the unorganized, the employed and the unemployed workers are identical. It is convinced that the policy of the united front from organization to organization will enable the workers to cope with the problems that confront them. It believes that the struggle of the unemployed has only begun and it attempts to bring the entire working-class movement to the active support of the unemployed.

The differences between the CP and the CLA around organizing the unemployed were widely discussed in Open Forums and at League events by local leaders such as Ray Dunne and national Trotskyist spokesman Max Shachtman. Among Minneapolis truckers who witnessed first hand the Trotskyists in action, there was little interest in Stalinist "demagogy and factual distortion."⁴⁹

The Communist League of America was riding the wave of working-class militancy and radicalism sweeping Minnesota in 1934. May Day 1934 was celebrated by thousands of unemployed, who rallied at the Municipal Auditorium and marched to City Hall, which was ringed by police. Street railway workers, closely aligned with the Trotskyist-led truckers, threatened to strike in mid-May after 77 of their number were dismissed because of union affiliation. Across the city, workers prepared for a major confrontation.⁵⁰

The Farmer-Labor governor, Floyd Olson, was viewed by deluded reactionaries as hell-bent on paving the way to a Soviet Minnesota. In a futuristic political

49 William Kitt, "Minneapolis Workers Fight Starvation Program," *The Militant*, 14 April 1934; William Curran, "Shachtman on Tour: Minneapolis," *The Militant*, 14 April 1934; Bill Curran, "Role of Unemployed Labor in Union Fight," *The Organizer*, 11 August 1934; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 67.

50 "Ice Workers Ordered to End Strike," *Minneapolis Journal*, 1 April 1934; "Vote on Ice Peace Tonight," *Minneapolis Journal*, 2 April 1934; "Ice and Fuel Delivered As Strike Halts," *Minneapolis Journal*, 3 April 1934; "May Day in Minneapolis," *Minneapolis Journal*, 1 May 1934; "Issues in Two Labor Disputes," *Minneapolis Journal*, 14 May 1934; "Strike Vote of City Street-car Men Delayed," *Minneapolis Journal*, 16 May 1934.

tract, published in St. Paul in 1934, Robert C. Emery described how a fictional John Hansen returned to Minnesota after thirty years absence. He was dismayed to find Minneapolis in 1964 to be a virtual police state, an “ultra soviet regime” with private property collectivized and basic freedoms abolished. The city was renamed Olsonia. “It was done as a tribute to Governor Floyd B. Olson, who was in office when you left,” explained Hansen’s brother. “What Lenin was to Russia, Governor Olson has been to Minnesota. He is called ‘the founder of the faith’. It was during his third campaign for governor that his liberal supporters first presented their public ownership program, which was the opening wedge from which everything else has grown.”⁵¹

Olson, known for populist grandstanding, issued statements in the depths of the depression that private ownership may well have been saddling Minnesota with an unmanageable burden. At a 1934 convention of the Farmer-Labor Association, he asked, “should not the government own all those industries which have to do with the obtaining of raw materials and transforming them into necessary products?” The governor suggested that public ownership of such resources could perhaps be understood as part of the “ideals of this movement” of farmer-laborism that he and his audience were engaged in building, the end result of which was “an ultimate co-operative commonwealth.” This, however, was Olson’s rhetoric running ahead of his actual politics. No sooner had he departed the convention than he was backtracking, appalled at the supposed misrepresentation of his views, and deeply troubled that there were those in his audience who interpreted him to be endorsing nationalizing idle factories to employ the jobless, or state take-overs of banks and businesses. James Rorty had no trouble sizing up Olson’s pronouncements as “a kind of political, quasi-Social Democratic hot-cha – enough to get ... headlines in the morning papers, but nothing more.” Olson, who was preparing a run for the Senate, was never going to do much, Rorty thought, than “make fierce Populist faces.”⁵²

Olson’s radicalism, however rhetorical, was enough to raise the hackles of Minnesota’s conventional Republican mainstream. Conservative state senators did not appreciate their governor welcoming farmers who were protesting the rising tide of mortgage foreclosures or upstaging Roosevelt at a politicians’ conference with bombastic pronouncements about conscripting wealth in order to “put the people back to work.” From the steps of the State Capital, Olson told

51 Robert C. Emery, *Thirty Years From Now* (St. Paul: R.C. Emery, 1934), 22.

52 Walker, *American City*, 67–68; Rorty, *Where Life is Better*, 186. See also, Leif H. Gilstad, “Pfaender Sees Power Behind Olson Throne,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 15 May 1934; Gilstad, “Farmer-Labor Analyzes Platform, Denies Interest to Take Over Factories,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 18 May 1934.

a throng of unemployed in April 1933 that if conditions in the United States could not be improved, he hoped "the present system of government goes right down to hell." Despite such populist palaver, Olson was firmly committed to maintaining class peace by introducing moderate reform to effect "orderly constructive change."⁵³

The CLA leaders saw through Olson's leftish posturing, but unlike the Communist Party they did not so much focus on his shortcomings as his professed pro-union sympathies, which they hoped to exploit in expanding labor organization among the truckers. As Minneapolis teamsters flocked to the General Drivers' Union, Local 574, Ray Dunne and others pressured a reluctant Olson to address a 15 April 1934 rally at a large local auditorium, the Shubert Theatre. Olson made no appearance, which was itself a statement, but he did send his secretary, Vince Day, a self-proclaimed philosophical anarchist, to read a statement. Farrell Dobbs considered Olson's message "even better for the union" than any appearance could have been. It distinguished workers' unions from company unions, railed against the "vested interests" that always sought to thwart labor organization in order to sustain a "reign of exploitation of the working man and woman," and championed the labor movement for using its collective strength to weather "gun fire, injunctions, and prosecution by malicious propaganda." In closing, Olson's message urged Minneapolis workers to "follow the sensible course and band together for your own protection and welfare." These words would come back to haunt the Farmer-Labor governor.⁵⁴

Olson's remarks were preceded by fighting speeches delivered by Bill Brown and Miles Dunne, as well as an organizational report by Grant Dunne. They were followed by Carl Skoglund. He outlined a set of demands in preparation for a strike vote and offered the workers a sketch of what lay ahead. On 30 April 1934, its ranks having surged to approximately 3,000, General Drivers' Union, Local 574, voted to target selected trucking employers with strike action. Demands included a closed shop, a minimum wage of 56 cents an hour for a forty-hour work week, with overtime thereafter. This would translate into an average wage of \$27.50 weekly. Caught off guard, the trucking bosses, closely monitored by the Citizens' Alliance, dug in their heels and refused to negotiate. The Alliance, convinced that communism was running rampant in Minneapolis, viewed the strike action as tantamount to a Soviet revolution. It had already set up an association of 166 trucking firms, many of them small outfits of marginal importance in the city's transportation industry. The Alliance also

53 Walker, *American City*, 65–68; Mayer, *Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 187.

54 Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 64–65; Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 215–216.

met with the mayor and the police to encourage constituted authority to stand firmly against the unionization drive and established an anti-strike headquarters in a prominent downtown hotel. The clash between the truck drivers and their bosses was shaping up as a titanic and irreconcilable conflict.

Labor and capital sparred at the Regional Labor Board, but the bickering achieved nothing and the talks, such as they were, soon collapsed. Brown declared that a union walkout would “tie up every wheel in the city.” A strike date was set for 16 May 1934. As in the coal yards strike, the Communist League of America leadership scheduled the job action so as to optimize the chances of working-class victory. Ann Ross noted in the *New Republic* that the “strike was timed for May because the movement of vegetables, gasoline, etc., was then at its height.”⁵⁵

Local 574, led by the Dunne brothers, Skoglund, Brown, and Dobbs, left nothing to chance in its methodical arrangements for the coming strike. The Trotskyist core of the Organizing Committee of the General Drivers’ Union began from the premise “that the bosses would never recognize the union. Their record proved it. Nor would they grant the workers any concessions unless we forced them to do so. We prepared *at the very beginning* for a fight which we knew was inevitable.”⁵⁶

Skoglund stressed from the outset that it was only by “all the sections of the trucking industry *acting together*” that the General Drivers’ Union would “have a chance of winning anything for any one of them.” The union would not only be battling the Citizens’ Alliance and the trucking bosses, but also Teamster President, Dan Tobin. The conservative hierarchy of the IBT resolutely opposed including so-called “inside workers” in the union, regarding this as a violation of the traditional craft jurisdiction that restricted teamster membership to drivers and their helpers. Dock loaders, warehousemen, clerks, dispatchers, checkers, traffic managers and other workers – all an integral part of trucking operations – were, in Tobin’s view, ineligible for union membership in Local 574. Skoglund, the Dunne brothers, and the rest of the Organizing Committee took advantage of the Minneapolis teamsters’ designation of themselves as a Gen-

55 Tselos, “The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s,” 216–217; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 66–67; Mayer, *Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 204; Walker, *American City*, 90–91; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 79–88; Ann Ross, “Labor Unity in Minneapolis,” *New Republic*, 25 July 1934, 284. For the details of the pre-strike discussions and developments see many articles in *Minneapolis Journal*, 1 May 1934–14 May 1934, with Brown quoted in “Peace Effort Fails; Drivers Strike Nears,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 12 May 1934, and the final union meeting and strike vote outlined in “Workers to Vote Tonight on Walkout if Negotiations Fail,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 14 May 1934.

56 Walker, *American City*, 94.

eral Drivers' Union, scheduling meetings of particular occupational sectors of the transportation industry. Strike demands addressing grievances particular to discrete occupations were developed. Among the departments designated by the Drivers' Union were ice, coal, transfer, market-wholesale grocery, package delivery, department stores, furniture outlets, independent truck owners, building materials, excavation, and sand and gravel. Skoglund recalled meetings of 34 different sections of transport workers, which met to come up with contract demands around wages, hours, and conditions. The Trotskyist leadership thus reinvented Local 574, as a recent student of the truckers' mobilization, Kristoffer O. Smemo suggests, refashioning it as a mass, industrial union rather than a selective and narrow craft body. The expansion of Local 574's membership, and its impressive diversity, provided the union with the leverage needed to extract important gains for workers in the differentiated transportation industry.⁵⁷

As a strike threatened in April and May 1934, Tobin predictably did his utmost to scotch the mass influx of new members into the General Drivers' Union, many of them much-maligned "inside workers." He suspended Local 574 from the International and denied it the right to call a strike; demanded that industry-wide organizing cease; and insisted that negotiations be conducted under the auspices of the Regional Labor Board of Roosevelt's National Recovery Administration [NRA]. Unable to stem the flow of workers into the rising industrial union, Tobin tried to exert pressure through the local AFL-dominated Central Labor Union. An AFL official was dispatched to Minneapolis to inform the CLU that if it continued to seat General Drivers' Union delegates its charter would be revoked. This led to a heated CLU meeting, where a voice from the floor suggested tossing the AFL emissary out of the hall on his head. With the strike looming, Local 574 did not want to waste time and energy wrangling with Tobin's bureaucratic messengers. It preferred to concentrate efforts on expanding its base and preparing for the looming battle with the trucking firms. The General Drivers' Union continued to cultivate informal support among its many sympathetic contacts inside the Central Labor Union, but it voluntarily withdrew its delegate from the trades assembly, thus pre-empting a vote for expulsion. The CLU, for its part, responded by endorsing Local 574's strike

57 Skoglund interviewed by Halstead, 24 April 1955, Transcript, 27, Box 2, Riehle Papers, MNHS; Smemo, "The Politics of Labor Militancy in Minneapolis," 27, drawing on Charles Rumford Walker, "Notes for Life Story of a Truck Driver," Box 1, File: "American City: Preliminary Prospectus and General Notes," CRW Papers, MNHS. See also "Organizational Structure 574," 6-page Typescript, in File: "Notes Local 574 and Strike," Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS.

demands, thus boxing a number of reluctant AFL craft union figureheads into supporting the seemingly inevitable teamsters' rebellion.⁵⁸

The rank-and-file sectoral committees Skoglund and Ray Dunne promoted were a crucial industrial union initiative that cultivated solidarities across a previously fragmented workforce, building the momentum of strike preparation. These informal and proliferating organizing committees actually supplanted the General Drivers' Union Executive Board, comprised largely of "old line labor-skates." The informal organizing committees also became nurseries of class struggle leadership. Older, experienced Trotskyists helped younger, up-and-coming militants develop speaking skills, sending these novice agitators into other local unions to explain the teamster campaign and build solidarity. Conservative, mainstream trade union attempts to monitor and constrain the core voluntary Organizing Committee, initiated by Communist League of America members and their militant allies, proved futile. Ignoring Tobin's dictates and breaking down the barriers of craft exclusiveness and sectoral, occupational separations, the Minneapolis General Drivers' Union was charting a new form of "rank-and-file democracy" within the petrified shell of an AFL local affiliate.⁵⁹

Cannon stressed the significance of how his comrades worked "through the Central Labor Union, by conferences with the labor skates as well as by pressure from below, to put the whole labor movement in Minneapolis on record in support of these newly-organized truck drivers." He noted how the League "worked tirelessly to involve the officials of the Central Labor Union in the campaign, to have resolutions passed endorsing [Local 574's] demands." This insured that mainstream trade union figureheads "take official responsibility," so that "unions of the American Federation of Labor found themselves in advance in a position of having endorsed the demands and being logically bound to support the strike." Winning the sympathy, support, and material aid of the labor movement and other potentially supportive constituencies, while continually mobilizing a militant rank-and-file base, was central to building a successful strike. Trotskyists in the CLA and Local 574 made a special effort to get the General Drivers' Union's publicity into the *Minneapolis Labor Review*, official organ of the CLU, cultivating productive and friendly relations with its editor, Robley D. [Bob] Cramer. An intelligence report on Cramer in 1934 stated that he had, "rendered immeasurable assistance to the General Drivers' Strike leaders, advising them constantly." Cramer, a Farmer-Laborite with ties to Governor

58 Walker, *American City*, 94–95; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 88–90; Dobbs, *Teamsters Rebellion*, 67.

59 Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 62–63.

Olson, helped Local 574 develop connections with the militant Farmers' Holiday Association, which led resistance to farm foreclosures in Minnesota and launched milk strikes to extract higher prices for producers from the creameries. Farmers regularly trucked fruit and vegetables, livestock, and other wares into Minneapolis, so their support for a shutting down of the trucking industry was critical. After the February coal yards strike, Holiday Association President, John Bosch, who harbored considerable antipathy to the urban capitalist overlords, developed relations with the CLA and assured Local 574 of his organization's full support in the event of another trucking work stoppage. As Ray Dunne explained to readers of *The Militant*, the strategic importance of the trucking industry in Minneapolis was never understood by most AFL trade union leaders, who tended to view the General Drivers' Union's activity as getting "in the way" of the "official" labor movement. Dunne insisted that, "This attitude must be changed. It is a menace to the whole labor movement. The General Drivers can and must be made the corner stone for the trade union structure as a whole. This corner stone is not yet in place. The entire workers movement will see to this job and bring the unions into action to this end."⁶⁰

One component of change evident in the mid-1934 strike preparations of Local 574 was what its Trotskyist leadership learned from the Toledo Auto-Lite General Strike. That militant mobilization demonstrated that sustained organization of the Unemployed Leagues, and their alignment with striking workers, lent mass picketing an intense vigor and effectiveness, as well as bolstering other forms of strike support. The CLA played an important role in the Minneapolis unemployed movement in 1934 and Ray Dunne and C.R. Hedlund used

60 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 145–146; R [Vincent Ray Dunne], "Minneapolis Union Prepares for Action," *The Militant*, 12 May 1934; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 60–61, 67; Miles Dunne, "Story of 544," *Northwest Organizer*, 27 February 1941; Korth, *Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 90–91, 116, 130; Maloney interviewed by Duffy and Miller, 24 July 1979, Transcript 11, Box 2, File: "1934 Teamsters Strike," Maloney Papers, MNHS; Maloney interviewed by Salerno, Rachleff, and Seaverson, 5–9 April 1988, Transcript, 168–169, Box 1, Maloney Biographical File, 1911–1999, Riehle Papers, MNHS; Skoglund interviewed by Halsted, 24 April 1955, Transcript, 29–30, Box 2, Riehle Papers, MNHS. In the informant's intelligence report on Robley Cramer in 1934, the CLU editor's radicalism was exaggerated: "Volumes could be written about the radical activities of this labor leader. He is not a member of the Communist organizations by reason of the fact that as editor of the official journal of the Central Labor Union of Minneapolis, he does not dare join. ... He is, nevertheless, present at most of their meetings; is one of the most vitriolic and inflammatory speakers against capitalism." See US Military Intelligence Reports: Surveillance of Radicals in the United States, 1917–1941, Reel 32 – Series 2667, Seventh Corps Areas – Omaha, Nebraska, HQ, File 0348, Series 2667–53, June 1934, Minneapolis Truckers Drivers Strike, 4pp.

their contacts to spread the word that “Local 574’s strategy included the organization of an unemployed section of the union once it had been consolidated.” This meshed with plans to fight for relief for the strikers, should the walkout extend over a significant period of time. Leaders of the jobless movement were invited to participate in discussions of strike strategy. Rather than being treated as second-rate “country cousins,” the out-of-work were welcomed as an integral part of the mobilization.⁶¹

Few strikes could boast of the outreach and planning undertaken in Minneapolis in the spring of 1934. Eric Sevareid, a cub reporter for the *Minneapolis Star* who would subsequently go on to a distinguished career as a nationally prominent CBS reporter, concluded that the Dunne brothers “organized the strike as none had been organized before in American history.” Even the police conceded, retrospectively: “The strike was beautifully organized. ... Just a terrific job.”⁶²

Arne Swabeck viewed all of this as part of a new labor upsurge. A fresh influx of unionists, according to Swabeck, was opening the door to an unprecedented stage of working-class militancy. Pointing out that, “The center of gravity of the trade union movement is still within the A.F. of L.,” Swabeck projected that, “A continuation of its policies and betrayals will unmistakably lead to the possibilities of new militant unions emerging. But such moves can become successful only after the rank and file thoroughly absorb the experiences after a period of crystallization of forces and a better understanding of the purposes and tasks of militant unions. Above all,” Swabeck stressed, “it can become successful only under the direction of a conscious left wing movement.” With “new mass numbers in the unions ... defending the unions, ... fighting for their recognition, [and] driving them into action on a large scale,” Swabeck concluded, “the leaders who yield to the company unions and accept the class collaboration ... instituted by the NRA” were about to be displaced.⁶³

61 A Rail, “Minneapolis Rail Workers Organize,” *The Militant*, 12 May 1934; Miles Dunne, “Story of 544,” *Northwest Organizer*, 27 February 1941; and for a general discussion on the role of the unemployed, Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 109, 132, 164–165.

62 Eric Sevareid, *Not So Wild A Dream* (New York: Atheneum, 1976); Ed Ryan, quoted in Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 117.

63 Arne Swabeck, “New Trends in the Trade Union Movement,” *The Militant*, 12 May 1934.

7 Overcoming 'Bureaucratic Obstacles'

Orchestrated by the Communist League of America leadership of Local 574, the Minneapolis strike strategy put a high priority on exposing and neutralizing Tobin, Olson, and any other labor movement figures who might claim to be supporting the struggle, but who would in fact act as props of the *status quo*. In contrast to the class collaboration of Tobin and the rest of the AFL bureaucracy in the local Teamsters' Joint Council and the Central Labor Union, the General Drivers' Union repeatedly highlighted the fundamentally antagonistic interests of labor and capital.

In his later writings about the 1934 struggles, Farrell Dobbs described how overcoming "bureaucratic obstacles" within the trade union movement, at both the local and national levels, was fundamental to the success of the 1934 organizing drive. He noted that the CLA expected mainstream trade union functionaries "to be hostile toward the projected strike action." Rather than harping on the routinized foot-dragging and obstructionism of Tobin and his IBT business agent, Cliff Hall, CLA forces concentrated on maintaining the momentum of the struggle against the trucking companies, confident that the ranks would come to see the defeatist proclivities of labor bureaucrats. According to Dobbs, the plan was "to aim the workers' fire straight at the employers and catch the union bureaucrats in the middle. If they didn't react positively, they would stand discredited."

The Trotskyists pursued a similar course with Governor Olson: his core support was based among Minnesota's progressives, which meant that coming out as an overt strikebreaker would end his political career. Yet in an unambiguous showdown between capital and labor, Olson was just the kind of authority who could tap into his seeming status as a friend of working men and women to take over the leadership of any class struggle. He would then divert it into compromise and conciliation, siphoning away the potential of any truly meaningful material advances and dampening down the possibility that radical, even revolutionary, consciousness might develop within the broader layers of the working class.⁶⁴

Throughout the 1934 teamsters' insurgency Trotskyists did their best to maneuver Olson and his counterparts in the trade union officialdom into situations where if these types did not stand with the workers, at least rhetorically, they risked alienating their base of support. The Shubert Theatre mass rally of mid-April 1934, in which Local 574's strength was consolidated, a strike vote was first

64 The above paragraphs draw on Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 43–45.

taken, and a broad strike-committee elected, was a case in point. Discussions inside the leading bodies of the General Drivers' Union, its Organizing Committee, and its Executive Board, revealed a split between conservative IBT officials such as Cliff Hall and Trotskyists and their sympathizers, key among them Miles Dunne, Carl Skoglund, and Bill Brown. Initially Hall objected to spending \$66 to rent a large public hall, an opposition reflecting the IBT mainstream leadership's desire to avoid a mass meeting of insurgent workers. The CLA militants and Brown spoke up on the necessity of making proper arrangements and eventually carried the day.

The next step was to invite Olson to address the rally, the theme of which was "The Right to Organize." Realizing that the Farmer-Labor Governor would draw a big crowd, and that he would have no choice but to go on record "in support of the union campaign," Brown, the Dunne brothers, and Skoglund then reaped the benefits of Olson's public statement, delivered *in absentia* by his aide. But as Olson hitched his cart to Local 574's class struggle wagon, his credibility in militant working-class circles rose. The danger of understating the extent to which the Farmer-Labor governor would inevitably turn against working-class interests if the battle between truckers and employers threatened the stability of the capitalist order increased. In hindsight, there are indications that the Minneapolis Trotskyists did not do enough to prepare the union ranks for the likelihood of Olson eventually turning against them at a critical juncture, as he subsequently did, and as will be detailed below.

This shortcoming aside, the Left Oppositionists in command of the General Drivers' Union were capable of criticizing Olson when the Governor clearly took actions that undermined the effectiveness of Local 574's strikes. The Minneapolis Communist League of America thus *generally* exhibited an acute understanding of how to negotiate the contradictions – political and economic, organizational and ideological – at play in relations affecting the local class struggle in 1934. This led one teamster militant, recruited to Trotskyism in the midst of these battles, and appreciative of what they won for the Minneapolis working class, to declare: "We couldn't have done it without a disciplined revolutionary party."⁶⁵

65 The quotes in the above paragraphs are from Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 63–65, and, quoting Harry DeBoer, 187. For a brief, useful discussion of the Trotskyist approach to trade union matters in Minneapolis in 1934 see Chris Knox, "Trotskyist Work in the Trade Unions, Part 2: Minneapolis 1934 – General Strike!" in Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program: The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (London: International Bolshevik Tendency, 1998), 93–103.

8 The Ladies'/Women's Auxiliary

An especially important achievement was the explicit, conscious, and successful organization of working-class women to support the male strikers. Cannon stressed that the Minneapolis Trotskyists "took a leaf from the Progressive Miners of America and organized a Women's Auxiliary to help make trouble for the bosses." His own positive assessment of the Illinois women of the mining communities may well have prompted him to suggest a similar initiative to his Minneapolis comrades.⁶⁶

The idea of a Local 574 Auxiliary was apparently first broached in the living room of Clara and Grant Dunne, where Ray Dunne, Miles Dunne, Carl Skoglund, and Farrell Dobbs discussed the possibility of Clara and Dobbs' wife, Marvel Scholl, setting up an organization of women who supported the union. They agreed to do so, although perhaps with some trepidation. Neither had "ever made a speech, public or otherwise," and they were well aware of the difficulty of the task. Skoglund, who apparently first proposed the formation of the Auxiliary, was committed to a brand of industrial unionism that was "equal for everyone ... including women. His expression was 'women hold up half the sky' and they're entitled to ... half the jobs."⁶⁷

This was a long way from happening in Minneapolis in the 1930s. Farrell Dobbs, who initially presented the idea of bringing women into the struggle to a general membership meeting of Local 574, ran into considerable opposition. Many men were uneasy with the thought of wives, sisters, girlfriends, and mothers suddenly becoming involved in union activities, which they regarded as separate and distinct from the domestic sphere. Union meetings were viewed as a "night out" with the boys. It was all they had ever known. Dobbs had sufficient authority in Local 574 to get the idea of a Ladies' Auxiliary accep-

66 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 149. On the Illinois Progressive Miners and their Women's Auxiliary movement see Dallas M. Young, "Origins of the Progressive Mine Workers of America," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 40 (1947), 313-330; Harriet D. Hudson, *The Progressive Mine Workers of America: A Study in Rival Unionism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Bureau of Economics and Business Research Bulletin 73, 1952); Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 358-366; David Thoreau Weick, *Woman from Spillertown: A Memoir of Agnes Burns Weick* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992); Stephane E. Booth, "Ladies in White: Female Activism in the Southern Illinois Coal Fields, 1932-1938," in John M. Laslett, ed., *The United Mine Workers of America: A Model of Industrial Solidarity* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); Caroline Waldron Merithew, "We Were Not Ladies': Gender, Class, and a Women's Auxiliary Battle for Mining Unionism," *Journal of Women's History*, 18 (Summer 2006), 63-94.

67 Maloney interviewed by Salerno, Rachleff, and Seaverson, 1-4 April 1988, Transcript, 65, Box 1, Maloney Biographical File, 1911-1999, Riehle Papers, MNHS.

ted, but there was little enthusiasm. He was subjected to some “needling” for introducing women into what had previously been an exclusively male domain.

These sentiments dissipated quickly as Marvel Scholl and Clara [Holmes] Dunne explained to various workers’ committees how women could undertake a variety of crucial and important tasks in the event of a strike. Picketers facing down cops and scabs needed sustenance; the injured required care; and the families of strikers had to be supported. Women’s domestic and occupational skills could be put to good use at strike headquarters and in the community. Scholl and Dunne appeared almost nightly before small groups at the Central Labor Union to discuss what needed doing in the run-up to the scheduled May conflict.⁶⁸ Later, in July 1934, the Ladies’ Auxiliary distributed two thousand invitations to women to participate in a mass protest parade and rally demanding union rights in the trucking industry. Women began to phone Marvel and Clara at home, volunteering as cooks, waitresses, nurses, and clerical workers. Husbands began to talk to wives, young men to girlfriends, sons to mothers.

Cannon sought to capture (and perhaps promote) this development in an imaginative fictionalization of a striker’s letters to his country girlfriend. The column, “Letters to dere emily,” become a regular feature of Local 574’s daily strike bulletin, *The Organizer*.⁶⁹ Through this intimate, but routine, fictional

68 I stress the leading roles of Dunne and Scholl, who embraced Trotskyism like their husbands, because according to the documents I have been able to uncover, their significance in the Women’s Auxiliary was unrivalled. They were also elected as President (Dunne) and Secretary-Treasurer (Scholl) of the Auxiliary, arguably the most important administrative posts. Other women of decidedly different political orientations, no doubt contributed much, and the Women’s Auxiliary, as a broad union organization, encompassed a diversity of women and political perspectives. The wife of IBT bureaucrat Cliff Hall, for instance, was elected Vice-President of the Auxiliary, and it is possible that the wife of Minneapolis Milk Drivers’ Union business agent, Patrick J. Corcoran (an ally of Tobin in this period), was one of a small group of Auxiliary trustees. During the 1934 mobilizations in the trucking industry differences between women such as Dunne and Scholl, on the one hand, and Hall, on the other, might have been suppressed in the upheavals of the moment, but in the aftermath of the strikes of 1934, the Women’s Auxiliary was apparently disrupted by conservative women’s attacks on Local 574’s leadership. This resulted in the Women’s Auxiliary being wound down, an unfortunate development that raises obvious questions about autonomy and control. On the election of Auxiliary officers and preparation for the 6 July 1934 mass parade and rally see “Auxiliary Elects Officers,” *The Organizer*, 25 June 1934; and, on the Auxiliary’s demise, Maloney’s note appended to “The Organizer: Secret of Local 574,” Box 3, Maloney Papers, MNHS.

69 Cannon’s column may well have been inspired, as David Riehle has suggested to me, by a popular World War I book by Edward Streeter, *Dere Mabel: Love Letters of a Rookie* (1918), which collects fictional letters written by a doughboy to his girlfriend. The Streeter book went through 13 printings.

correspondence, Cannon helped young men transcend previous notions of union activity as a masculine enclave and begin to engage in discussions with women about work, politics, labor organization, and strikes. Cannon's "dere emily" writing paralleled everyday life and aimed at reinforcing the conscious attempt by the Trotskyist leadership of the General Drivers' Union to dissolve the longstanding and deeply-rooted gendered bifurcation of the working class. Eventually the Women's Auxiliary would convene every second and fourth Monday of the month. For many of its members these meetings served as an introduction to "a whole new world ... outside [the] home."⁷⁰

The Women's Auxiliary, as originally proposed, was assigned traditional, nurturing, female roles – staffing the union commissary and first-aid station or handling telephones – and Clara Dunne recalled somewhat contemptuously that, "No one from the woman's auxiliary sat on the meetings of the main (union) committee. It was 'no women allowed'. We did what they wanted us to do, if they wanted us to run errands." The mainstream press reflected this attitude. "Their wives," declared the *Minneapolis Journal* in reference to strikers' spouses, "like the wives of men in war, are behind the firing lines." This view of the Women's Auxiliary, often referred to in the parlance of the mid-1930s as the Ladies' Auxiliary, is reflected in much recent scholarly comment on the Minneapolis labor struggles of the era.

Scholl's recollections in a 1975 account strike a different note. She pointed out that women were not always excluded, and drew attention to one decisive meeting that endorsed the strike. "[T]here were many women in the hall," she remembered, and "although their vote didn't count because they were not union members, when the motion for a secret ballot was voted down and a hand ballot approved, these women raised their hands as high as the men, and sang 'Solidarity Forever' as loudly." Skoglund recalled in a 1955 interview how,

70 The above paragraphs draw on Marvel Scholl in "Socialist Women and Labor Struggles, 1934–1954: A Report by Participants," *International Socialist Review*, 36 (March 1975), 20–23; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 68–69; *The Organizer*, 2 July 1934; Marjorie Penn Lasky, "Where I Was a Person: The Ladies' Auxiliary in the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters' Strikes," in Ruth Milkman, ed., *Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of US Women's Labor History* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), quoting Marvel Scholl, 196; Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle*, 72. Cannon's "Letters to dere emily," first appeared in *The Organizer*, 20 July 1934, shortly after Cannon arrived in Minneapolis. The column ceased publication by September 1934, when Cannon returned to New York. Over 20 "dere emily" entries (a couple had emily writing to mike) appear in *The Organizer*, and below I quote from them and offer further evidence of why they can be attributed to Cannon. The only acknowledgment of Cannon writing this column that I have seen appears in a casual handwritten note by Maloney, appended to a document, "The Organizer: The Secret of Local 574," Box 3, Riehle Papers, MNHS.

following a doctor's advice, the commissary changed its fare and began providing balanced meals for strikers, many of whom were doing the bulk of their eating in the union's cafeteria. The effort "to change the type of food so as to maintain good health" meant that it was "possible for strikers with families to bring them down to the headquarters to eat, thereby bringing the whole family into the fight."⁷¹

Feminist scholars Elizabeth Faue and Marjorie Penn Lasky characterize the Ladies' Auxiliary of Local 574 as rooted "in conservative gender ideology." They present a somewhat nuanced assessment of the dual character of the Women's Auxiliary. On the one hand, they see it as an expression of a confining domesticity, where "auxiliary" work was associated with stereotypical female tasks and circumscribed gender roles. This designated "women's work," organized as such *within* the labor movement, inevitably extended and perhaps even tightened the straightjacket of traditional gender roles. In reproducing conventional masculine/feminine difference this ultimately replicated and even perhaps confirmed the dominance of males. On the other hand, women also experienced liberation in their involvement in the Women's Auxiliary, participating in an important social movement and sharing with men a sense of contributing to social transformation and human betterment. Especially as class struggle escalated, women could find themselves engaged in transgressive activity, stepping outside of orthodox understandings of women's place.⁷²

An "Auxiliary Member" wrote an article in late May 1934 entitled "Women Active on Firing Line" that described the various roles played by women in Local 574's recent struggles. She noted that those women "trained in office work took over the routine" tasks at strike headquarters while giving "their heart and soul to the feeding of hungry droves of men." She also acknowledged how women raised money for the Commissary Relief Fund. "The necessity of feed-

71 The above paragraphs draw on Clara [Holmes] Dunne quoted in Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 175–176; "Strikers Turn Garage into Headquarters ... Wives Take Place Behind Lines to Make Meals," *Minneapolis Journal*, 16 May 1934; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 68–70; Skoglund interviewed by Halstead, 24 April 1955, Transcript, 30, Box 2, Riehle Papers, MNHS; Scholl, "Socialist Women and Labor Struggles," 21, whose views are similar to those expressed by Pauline DeBoer in Steven Trimble, ed., "Interviews with Strikers," *Red Buffalo*, 2 & 3 (no date, 1971?), esp. 73–76; Auxiliary Member, "Women Active on Firing Line," *The Militant*, 2 June 1934; Le Sueur, "Notebooks, 1934–1935," Volume 8, 18, Box 26, Le Sueur Papers, MNHS; Sandra Redfield, *The Great Minneapolis Strikes and the Revolutionary Potential in 1934* (New Haven, CT: Revolutionary Communist League, 1984), 40.

72 Marjorie Penn Lasky, "'Where I Was a Person': The Ladies' Auxiliary in the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters' Strikes," in Milkman, ed., *Women, Work, and Protest*, esp. 200; Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle*, esp. 12–13, 72.

ing the families of the men on strike until they would again be able to draw wages," she stressed, "was brought home to us very forcibly" during the strike. "Auxiliary Member" began and ended her account, however, with evidence suggesting something other than gendered traditionalism. Women pickets, she stressed, put their bodies on the line, and suffered serious injury. She claimed that, "Three of our members were seriously injured in riots with police. One's life was despaired of for several days. Another was taken to the hospital with a very seriously fractured ankle." None of this was cause to pause. Women's place, she insisted, was "Into the Class Struggle!" "Auxiliary Member" concluded that "the power of women" needed to be felt more strongly and more directly in active class mobilization because "their place is right alongside the men," on the front lines of the fight "for their birth-right."⁷³

Faue's and Lasky's representations of the Minneapolis Ladies' Auxiliary perhaps understate the extent to which the Trotskyist leadership of the 1934 truckers' uprising struggled with their male chauvinist limitations. Skoglund, for instance, is presented as favoring a women's auxiliary largely because, like "most union men," he worried about women pressuring their husbands to avoid or retreat from class struggle because of possible threats to domestic security. They label this the "nagging wife syndrome." Scholl addresses the issue with more subtlety, acknowledging that as strikes dragged on and domestic reserves dwindled, many working-class wives grew understandably alarmed at the consequences of lost income. Then began a domestic "back-to-work campaign," with "the hungry faces of his children [breaking] the will of many a formerly loyal union man."

Skoglund and other Local 574 leaders were well aware of the immense financial hardships that strikes imposed on working-class families, but it does not follow that advocacy of ladies'/women's auxiliaries can be reduced to a fear "that women could not or would not hold the line against employers." Rather, as Dobbs made explicit in *Teamster Rebellion*, Skoglund's position flowed from his insistence that, "Instead of having their morale corroded by financial difficulties they would face during the strike," women should "be drawn into the thick of battle where they could learn unionism through firsthand participation."⁷⁴

73 Auxiliary Member, "Women Active on Firing Line," *The Militant*, 2 June 1934.

74 Contrast Scholl, "Socialist Women and Labor Struggles," 21 and Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 68–69 with Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle*, 72 and Lasky, "When I Was A Person," 186. See also "Ladies Auxiliary Give Benefit Dance," *The Organizer*, 25 June 1934; "Auxiliary Elects Officers," and "Domestic Service Department," *The Organizer*,

Organs of Local 574, like *The Organizer/Daily Strike Bulletin*, often appealed to women to join the Auxiliary to “further the cause to which your husband is fighting,”⁷⁵ while at the same time making it clear that female participation was an essential component of the widening solidarity necessary if insurgent labor was to make major, class struggle breakthroughs. This was precisely how Cannon posed the issue in May 1934, as Local 574 prepared to do battle with the trucking bosses:

It is not a strike of the men alone, but of the women also. The Minneapolis Drivers' Union proceeds on the theory that the women have a vital interest in the struggle, no less than the men, and draws them into action through a special organization. ... To involve the women in the labor struggle is to double the strength of the workers and to infuse it with a spirit and solidarity it could not otherwise have. This applies not only to a single union and a single strike; it holds good for every phase of the struggle up to its revolutionary conclusion.

Alluding to the ways in which the Progressive Miners of America had effectively developed and benefited enormously from the organization of a militant, class struggle Auxiliary movement, Cannon proclaimed that, “The grand spectacle of labor solidarity in Minneapolis is what it is because it includes also the solidarity of the working-class women.” Writing a few months later, in August 1934, under the pseudonym “Old Timer,” Cannon cited the creation of Local 574’s Women’s Auxiliary as one example of how the Drivers’ Union was “blazing new labor paths.” Learning from other struggles, like those waged by the Progressive Miners, “Local 574 is one of the very few local unions that have understood the necessity of organizing the women and making their organization a vital part of the strike machinery.” Writing in the *Daily Strike Bulletin*, Cannon saw a part of the unique stature of the Minneapolis Drivers’ Union as its recognition of the necessity of drawing the entirety of the working class into class struggles, appreciating that women were keen to enlist in labor’s wars. “The exploiters are organized to grind us down into the dust. We must organize our class to fight back. *And the women are half of the working class.* Their interests are the same as ours and they are ready to fight for them. Therefore: Organize them to take part in the class battle. This is the idea behind the

16 July 1934; “Commissary to Move,” *The Organizer*, 17 July 1934; “Ladies Auxiliary Notes,” *The Organizer*, 20 July 1934.

75 *The Organizer*, 2 July 1934; 9 July 1934.

wonderful organization of the Ladies' Auxiliary, and its effective cooperation with the union in the struggle."⁷⁶

The successful organization of a Ladies' Auxiliary to support the drive to unionize the trucking industry in Minneapolis was a bold initiative, even if somewhat limited by the dominant culture and the individual capacities and inclinations of those involved. Like the unionization of the trucking industry in Minneapolis, the Women's Auxiliary movement was undoubtedly a work in progress, an attempt to take the incomplete and imperfect organization of all workers and extend it, against historically constructed and entrenched constraints, into new spheres of possibility. The manifestations of traditional, gendered understandings of male-female difference are perhaps less surprising than the success the Women's Auxiliary enjoyed in enabling mothers, wives, and sisters to escape some of the confines of domesticity and feel themselves part of an historic struggle. One such woman, the wife of truck driver Roy Bauman, would soon be active in the Auxiliary, preparing food and coffee for strikers; leaving a copy of Local 574's newspaper, *The Organizer*, in an empty bottle on the doorstep to educate the milkman in trade union principles; and listening intently to strike speeches at union headquarters. Even more than Roy, Mrs. Bauman came to believe in the spring and summer of 1934 that "*strike(s) had to be won.*"⁷⁷ This was the articulation of the Women's Auxiliary's accomplishment, and it would, in the months to come, contribute significantly to the teamsters' rebellion.

9 Rebel Outpost: 1900 Chicago Avenue

On 12 May 1934 the General Drivers' Union called a mass meeting at the Minneapolis Eagles Hall. The turnout to the evening rally was large, boisterous, and impressive; the assembled workers heard resounding speeches from Bill Brown and others solidifying support for the strike, which was to begin three days later. Many women from the Auxiliary were present, and Scholl pledged their support in what all knew was going to be a difficult battle. The meeting adjourned

76 James P. Cannon, "Minneapolis Shows the Way: Learn from Minneapolis," *The Militant*, 26 May 1934; Old Timer, "574 Strike Methods are Blazing New Labor Paths," *The Organizer*, 18 August 1934. For other Old Timer articles in which Cannon recognized the energy, resilience, enthusiasm, and intelligence of 574's strike activity, attributing this working-class advance to both the General Drivers' Union and the Women's Auxiliary, see "Drivers' Strike Reveals Workers' Great Resources," 11 August 1934 and "The Secret of Local 574," 18 August 1934, reprinted in Cannon, *Notebook of an Agitator*, 86–88, 89–92.

77 On the Baumans see Walker, *American City*, 145–152.

to 1900 Chicago Avenue “where women and men alike joined in putting the finishing touches on preparation for the walkout.”⁷⁸

The old garage at 1900 Chicago Avenue, a former stable, was a dark, flat, two-storied building, 400 feet wide and a block long. Surrounded by office buildings, the comings and goings at 1900 Chicago Avenue in mid-May 1934 attracted copious comment from the neighborhood’s resident doctors, lawyers, and business people. They marveled at the parade of workmen and strange assortments of wives and middle-class volunteers congregated at the garage, all of whom came and went in oddly jubilant groups. The long vacant building was now “electric with activity.” The shock was perhaps greatest when a large sign, emblazoned with the foot-high words, “Strike Headquarters of General Drivers Union Local 574,” was suspended above the doorway. “Nothing will happen,” the liberal onlookers assured themselves, their voices perhaps betraying a hint of disbelief in such confident proclamations. “This will be settled square and above board. ... This is a civilized city. This will be settled over the table.” But the very transformation of the empty garage at 1900 Chicago Avenue was itself an indication that suggestions of inevitable class compromise were wishful thinking. It had been rented by the General Drivers’ Union, knowing that an imposing strike headquarters would be needed. The building’s transformation was a physical statement of the Trotskyist leadership’s preparation for and anticipation of what was truly at stake in Local 574’s struggle for union recognition. And it most certainly was not the calm that the business residents of Chicago Avenue regarded as their due.⁷⁹

On the eve of the strike, the refurbished garage at 1900 Chicago Avenue was a “beehive of activity.” Union carpenters and plumbers installed stoves, sinks, and serving counters in the commissary, a former car wash area recently white-washed. Local unions, friendly grocers, and sympathetic farmers lined up to supply foodstuffs and materials. Butcher workmen cut meats to prepare sandwiches. Decades later one striker recalled hauling a truckload of wieners to the strike kitchen, and seeing the Farm Holiday Association bringing in “pigs, cattle, chickens and everything else.” There was “a spirit for union in them days,” he concluded. Marvel Scholl remembered the Sunday chicken dinners, the stews served, and the vegetables and meats prepared in the commissary, but her most visceral memory was of spam, the canned, precooked ham concoc-

78 Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 69–70; Walker, *American City*, 97.

79 Meridel Le Sueur, “What Happens in a Strike,” 329–330; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 91; C.H., “Sidelights from the Great Battle of the Minneapolis Workers,” *The Militant*, 16 June 1934; Walker, *American City*, 99; A Striker, “How the Strike Was Organized,” *The Militant*, 2 June 1934.

tion mass produced by Minnesota's Hormel Foods, the very sight of which still made her nauseous decades later. Members of the Cooks and Waiters Union advised Women's Auxiliary volunteers on the ins and outs of feeding 4,000 to 5,000 people on a daily basis, while Mrs. Carle, a stout proletarian overseer, barked out instructions in the kitchen, dismissing any middle-class ladies she considered incapable of following orders. Some of them probably found work elsewhere – perhaps setting up cots in an area on the upper level, where strikers and supporters could get some sleep between picket shifts.

On the first floor of the garage there was a general office (staffed by the Women's Auxiliary), where typing and mimeographing was done, and new members were enrolled in the union. A Strike Committee of 75 coordinated activities. The “nerve center” of strike headquarters was located in a suite of original offices on the first floor. It had maps and charts dividing the city into fifteen districts (each with streets and picket locations clearly marked), a bank of telephones staffed by volunteers, a shortwave radio to monitor police calls, and a courier service of half-a-dozen teenagers on motorcycles. Vincent Ray Dunne and Farrell Dobbs oversaw the dispatching of groups of pickets, each assigned a captain and outfitted with written instructions.

The building also had a temporary auditorium with a stage and a loud-speaker system that could be heard throughout the garage and on the streets outside. There were nightly meetings inside the headquarters, where several thousand could gather to hear announcements about the latest developments or listen to guest speakers and musicians. An impromptu runway was roped off through the center of the garage, allowing for cars and trucks to be pushed in and out, their motors turned off to avoid carbon monoxide fumes. A crew of twelve to fifteen mechanics serviced the vehicles that would keep the mobile pickets “flying”; stores of gasoline had been secured; and a tire-repair service lined up. Donations of money from across the city (and much of the rest of the state), bankrolled the costs of all of this. The union received \$15,000 before 20 May 1934, with the powerful milk drivers' union providing \$2000; even Governor Olson kicked in \$500.

Another section of the building was set up to administer first-aid. Dr. H.P. McCrimmon, Mrs. Vera McCormack, two interns from the University of Minnesota hospital, and three trained nurses headed up a corps of volunteers in the makeshift “hospital,” the existence of which was one indication that the strike leadership was prepared for the worst. An organized guard monitored the building and surrounding streets, both as protection from unwarranted police intrusions and to ensure that strikers and their supporters were sober and orderly. A sign on the headquarters' wall proclaimed: “No drinking. You'll need all your wits.” Four armed watchmen reputedly kept a rooftop vigil. The elab-

orate preparations evident at 1900 Chicago Avenue were described by Charles Rumford Walker as an impressive “strike machine,” with a centralized “brain core of military operations.”

Cannon praised the garage headquarters as “a fortress for action.” Less laudatory was the *Minneapolis Tribune*’s assessment: “The strike headquarters are everything but a fort ... and might easily be converted into that should occasion come.” The local newspaper, something of a mouthpiece for the employers, suggested that the extensive strike preparations undertaken by the union indicated that Minneapolis was on the verge of a “far reaching affair, covering all the city and all its business and industry. ... Even before the start of the strike at 11:30 P.M. Tuesday, 15 May 1934, the ‘General Headquarters’ organization set up at 1900 Chicago Avenue was operating with all the precision of a military organization.” Press coverage of strike headquarters stressed the “surprising discipline” of “an order almost military.” One of the Dunne brothers, proudly showing off the union’s capacity to monitor police radio station calls through a short-wave system, smiled when commenting to a *Minneapolis Journal* reporter, “Pretty well organized, don’t you think.” Dobbs offered a more understated view: “On the whole the union was ... ready for action.”⁸⁰

10 The *Tribune* Alley Plot and the Battle of Deputies Run

The first three days of the strike – Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday – seemed like a sleepy Minneapolis Sunday. A “holiday atmosphere” prevailed. Clashes between strikers, non-union drivers, and police were evident, but the situation was relatively peaceful, and the city uncharacteristically quiet. Strike headquarters at 1900 Chicago Avenue combined serious purpose and discipline, on the one hand, with an exuberant festivity, on the other. “Whole families went down there,” recalled one Minneapolis workingman, “It was a perpetual picnic.”⁸¹

80 The above paragraphs draw on A Striker, “How the Strike Was Organized,” *The Militant*, 2 June 1934; Lasky, “Where I was a Person,” 187, 190, 193; Walker, *American City*, 99–103; Walker, “1900 Chicago” and “Ray Dunne,” in File: “American City Strike Notes: Dobbs, Skoglund,” Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 148; James P. Cannon, “Minneapolis Strike – An Answer to Its Defamers,” *The Militant*, 16 June 1934; Scholl, “Socialist Women and Labor Struggles,” 21; Ann Ross, “Labor Unity in Minneapolis,” 284; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 69–75; Le Sueur, “What Happens in a Strike,” 329–331; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 90–91; “Strikers Turn Garage into Strike Headquarters; Chiefs Snap Orders in Military Style,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 16 May 1934; Rorty, *Where Life is Better*, 190; Jacobs, *Is Curly Jewish?*, 53.

81 Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 135–136.

The economic life of Minneapolis, however, was paralyzed. As the sheriff later testified, the General Drivers' Union "had the town tied up tight." Local 574 allowed unionized milk, brewery, coal, and ice wagon truckers to conduct their business. Trucking owners later made much of the fact that the strike, strictly speaking, was only conducted against eleven firms. According to the Citizens' Alliance, no one walked off the job in 120 of the 166 Minneapolis trucking firms and drivers could report to work should they be needed. They were not needed, for the most part, precisely because all trucking ground to a halt. As Dobbs put it: "Nothing moved on wheels without the union's permission."

Some businesses, including the city's newspapers, arranged for police escorts to protect their deliveries. But with truck and transfer docking facilities, warehouses, wholesale outlets, and delivery services shut down there were no goods transported for most factories, general and department stores, grocery outlets, cleaners and laundries, breweries, bakeries, construction firms, and gas and oil companies (including service stations). The city's pivotal central Market District was, in the words of *The Militant*, "closed like a tomb." Some of the five thousand strikers gathered at the Chicago Avenue headquarters were dispatched to picket various strategic locations, while flying squadrons in vehicles toured the city and kept in regular communication with Ray Dunne, Farrell Dobbs, and other strike leaders. Charles Rumford Walker sketched the goings on at strike headquarters. "Men stood all day at four telephones which poured forth information to them and registered calls for strike help from every corner of the city. Picket captains were under instruction to phone every ten minutes from a known point, such as a friendly cigar store in their picket district, or a bar, or a striker's home." Pickets put in fifteen-hour days, and there were never less than 400–500 strikers camped out at the Chicago Avenue garage, eating, sleeping, and listening to detailed reports broadcast over the sound system, ready to be dispatched should emergencies arise. Women's Auxiliary members kept the sandwiches and coffee coming.

Fifty entry points at the city limits were guarded by strikers, who turned back farmers delivering vegetables. Most trucks inside the city trying to move merchandise under police escort were intercepted, their deliveries successfully halted. Some trucks were seized, and soon the streets around Chicago Avenue headquarters were crowded with vehicles full of livestock, tobacco, coffee and tea, coal, and hay. Gasoline attendants, who had at best reluctantly participated in the economic shutdown, decided to forego strikebreaking after an angry group of pickets lassoed a pumping station and then hauled it bumping down the street. A less dramatic, but equally effective, tactic was to park large trucks around the gas pumps and simply walk away, "bottling [the fuel-dispensing outlet] up completely."

The strike immediately divided the entire city, as “class lines [were] tightly drawn.” Workers supposedly supported the General Drivers’ Union in overwhelming numbers, reportedly as high as 95 per cent, constituting 65 per cent of the population of Minneapolis. The remaining 35 per cent were conflicted, running the gamut from vaguely sympathetic but questioning to vehemently hostile. Even private secretaries working for bosses inside the bowels of the Citizens’ Alliance decided they had a side in the dispute, surreptitiously sending on to 1900 Chicago Avenue information and documents helpful to the strikers. They were part of what Farrell Dobbs described as a “spontaneous intelligence service” that telephoned in reports of scab activities.

University students from Greek fraternities packed up their baseball bats and joined the police and the Citizens’ Alliance, but there were others from the college who “pitched in to help the union,” including a young Eric Sevareid and his friend, Dick Scammon, son of the University of Minnesota’s Dean of Medicine. Scammon, a giant of a young man, was blessed with acute intelligence, a prodigious memory, and a precocious interest in politics. In later years, Scammon would move decidedly to the center of the political spectrum, joining the Democratic Party and developing an expertise in polling, but in 1934 he was a member of the Socialist Party. At six foot four and two hundred and sixty pounds, Scammon could “swing a club” if he had to and was a welcome addition to the legion of strike supporters that came from outside the ranks of the traditional labor movement. The mid-May 1934 truckers’ strike was shaping up as “the most imposing display of labor solidarity and militancy Minneapolis [had] ever seen.”⁸²

The 166 trucking firms under the anti-union umbrella of the Citizens’ Alliance first played a waiting game. Largest among them attempted to cajole small businesses, like the plethora of city bakeries, to run bread trucks through the gauntlet of flying pickets, or to wait until the regional farmers broke strikers’ lines and liberated the central market. “Big Business was going to use the small farmers to pull their chestnuts out of the fire,” noted a report to *The Militant*, “using them as pawns to open up the market. They wanted the farmers to do

82 For quotes and information in the above paragraphs see “Minneapolis Shows The Way,” *The Militant*, 26 May 1934; Walker, *American City*, 97–99; Tselos, “The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s,” 219–222; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 92, 137–138; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 236; “Problems of the Truck Strike,” and “Strike Ties Up Truck Movement,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 16 May 1934; “Gas Stations to Re-Open, Defy Threats,” “Strike Threatens Food Supply of City,” and “Both Sides Explain Positions in Strike,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 17 May 1934; “Strike Riots Flare, 20 In Hospital,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 19 May 1934; Sevareid, *Not So Wild a Dream*, 57–58; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 74–76. On Scammon see my comments in Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters*, 89–90.

something that the big produce importers and distributors, the packing trust, the fruit trust, and the milling trust did not dare do themselves." As this tactic failed miserably, the General Drivers' Union appeared to have gained the upper hand. Among organized labor in Minneapolis-St. Paul, even in bastions of AFL conservatism, the instinctive reaction was to jump on the bandwagon of strike support: building tradesmen, street railway workers, and printers offered aid and the use of their members' skills. Talk of sympathetic strikes was widespread. Delegations of most of the city's unions made their way to 1900 Chicago Avenue: "Use us, this is our strike," was their common refrain. Cab drivers actually struck on Friday 18 May 1934. Unorganized factory laborers cheered the flying pickets as they cruised city thoroughfares. Unemployed organizations threw their weight behind the striking truckers; the jobless would soon gain a reputation as having "fought like tigers" beside their employed teamster counterparts. "The whole labor movement of Minneapolis was now on the defensive," explained Walker, "They sensed that a decisive defeat for the striking truck drivers meant the beginning of the end for organized labor in Minneapolis." Cannon extended the analytic canvas optimistically: "Today the whole country looks to Minneapolis," he wrote in *The Militant*. "Great things are happening there which reflect a strange new force in the labor movement, an influence widening and extending like a spiral wave. Out of the strike of the transport workers of Minneapolis a new voice speaks and a new method proclaims its challenge."⁸³

The Citizens' Alliance, which functioned as something of a shadow cabinet for the trucking employers, convened a meeting of a thousand businessmen to discuss how to reopen the streets for scab trucks. One participant recounted how gas stations had been kept open during the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919. The employers' meeting rebuffed an attempt by Governor Olson to work out a compromise, in which Local 574 would withdraw its demand for a signed contract. Instead, a call went out for a "mass movement of citizens" to "see to it that we are not dictated to by a mere handful." Police Chief Mike Johannes worked with Citizens' Alliance ideologues to assemble a force of "special police" and "deputies" to help break the strike. Many of these recruits had unsavory pasts. Some were recently released from jail, and one critic slammed them as "ex-crooks, murderers, and all the scum of the city." C.R. Hedlund of the

83 "Zero Hour 11:30; Union to Mass 2,000 Pickets," *Minneapolis Journal*, 15 May 1934; F.K., "Minneapolis Shows the Way: Building Trades in Sympathy; Womens Auxiliary Active in Fight; General Strike Growing; Workers' Spirit Soars," *The Militant*, 26 May 1934; James P. Cannon, "Learn from Minneapolis!" *The Militant*, 26 May 1934; Walker, *American City*, 110–111; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 74–76.

CLA later identified local hold-up artist, Dick Daniels, as one of the “deputies.” Olson worried that the low quality of many of these “special city police officers” might result in physical injury to Minnesotans, including innocent parties, if the recruits supplementing the police were unleashed in the midst of the strike.

“Keeping the streets open,” took on the force of a religious conviction for those in most positions of constituted authority; in the evangelical crusade to break the strike there were merely those aligned with order and those arrayed against it. Mayor A.G. Bainbridge authorized putting 500 new police on the municipal payroll. Yet there was evidence of popular resistance: the American Legion rebuffed an official police request to organize a corps of 1500 volunteers; when the Citizens’ Alliance approached the Veterans of Foreign Wars to put together a contingent of “special deputies” it received an impolite response to “this asinine request.”

The whole city was tense. When Dunne and Dobbs learned that the police were wiretapping telephones at strike headquarters they began using code to dispatch pickets. On the third day of the strike, the cops became more aggressive. There had been only eighteen arrests over the first two days of the job action, but on Friday 18 May 1934, the numbers taken into police custody soared, surpassing 150. Fines of \$50 were handed out promiscuously, and 17 of those brought before the courts received workhouse sentences of from ten to forty-five days. A Committee of Twenty-Five prominent trucking employers announced that it was prepared to handle negotiations with the strikers, while another Committee of Forty undertook to organize an “army of peace.” Its purpose was to defend Minneapolis against the riotous disorder fomented by “professional agitators and communists.” Colloquially known as the “Law and Order Committee,” this body rallied a rag-tag assembly of 1500 “salesmen, clerks, and patriotic golfers,” whipped into frenzy against “red dictators” bent on starving the “city into submission.”⁸⁴ The stage was set for a Saturday 19 May 1934 clash of irreconcilably-opposed class forces.

84 The above paragraphs draw on an array of sources. On the close connections of the Minneapolis and Winnipeg Citizens’ committees see Reinhold Kramer and Tom Mitchell, *When the State Trembled: How A.J. Andres and the Citizens’ Committee Broke the Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 15, 46–47, 170. For this paragraph see Tselos, “The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s,” 219–222; “Board of 40 Named to Aid Police Heads,” “Sluggings, Property Damage Mark City Strike Violence,” “Pickets Jailed,” and “Olson Begins Overtures for Peace Meet,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 18 May 1934; “Leaders Not Optimistic of Settlement,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 19 May 1934; Walker, *American City*, 100–111; Rorty, *Where Life is Better*, 194; William Kitt, “A Lesson in ‘Law and Order,’” *The Militant*, 2 June 1934; C.H., “Sidelights from the Great Battle of the Minneapolis

The City Market became the designated battle zone. Produce distributors, animated by fears that their perishable goods would rot in the market stalls if not moved, used scabs to load trucks on Saturday morning. A large contingent of 425 cops, supplemented by blackjack and club wielding "special deputies," protected the strikebreaking convoy. The barehanded workers were no match for the better-prepared and numerically superior police and their "specials." Sixteen workers and four cops ended up convalescing in hospital after the clash, but eighty trucks of produce were removed from the market.

As the defeated picket forces straggled back to 1900 Chicago Avenue, where their broken noses and shattered limbs were tended to, an impromptu meeting of Local 574 dashed off a letter of protest to Olson. The union withdrew its delegates from settlement discussions and threatened to "throw out a general call for every worker in Minneapolis and vicinity to assist us in protecting our rights and our lives." Nursing wounds and channeling their anger, workers settled into their fortress-like headquarters and planned for the inevitable escalation of the struggle on Monday, Sunday being a day in which little would move on the embattled streets. Letters to the *Minneapolis Journal* bemoaned the tyranny of trade unionism: "Are we going to be ruled by a mob in this town?" asked "Minneapolis." "Are we to allow the mob to tell us if we can buy gasoline for our cars? Are we going to allow them to prevent our food supplies moving through normal channels. ... The time has come for direct action," concluded this irate citizen, "if our authorities are not going to allow us the freedom of our American citizenship." Governor Olson began to make noises about sending in the National Guard, threatening that if necessary he was prepared to establish a military government and "take over all the machinery for distribution of foods and necessities." Moreover, if the National Guard proved incapable of taking "full charge of the city," Olson continued, he would not hesitate to induct more men into the service.⁸⁵

Emboldened by their victory on Saturday morning, the Citizens' Alliance and municipal police forces opted to push things in a new direction. One of their *agents provocateurs* (supposedly a badge-carrying Burns Detective

Workers," *The Militant*, 16 June 1934; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 90–95; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 77.

85 Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 222–223; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 94; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 77–79; "Strike Riots Flare, 20 in Hospital: Trucks Move, Battles with Police Follow," *Minneapolis Journal*, 19 May 1934. "Direct Action: Letter to the Editor," *Minneapolis Journal*, 19 May 1934; "Where Both Sides Stand in Truck Strike," and "Police Rout Strikers in Pitched Battles; Gardeners Run Gauntlet; Plans Laid out To Take Control of Food Delivery," *Minneapolis Journal*, 20 May 1934.

Agency hireling), ingratiated himself with the General Drivers' Union leadership. James O'Hara appeared at the Chicago Avenue headquarters, his credentials as an active worker in a Minneapolis ward on behalf of the Farmer-Labor Association vouched for, and he seemed an able and committed strike supporter. "I used to watch him," Grant Dunne later remembered, "and think him one of our best men. He was there twenty hours a day, and always busy." On Saturday evening at about 10 P.M., O'Hara managed to get hold of the dispatcher's mike and called for two or three cars of pickets to get ready to go out on assignment. Local 574 usually had a policy of keeping women out of potentially dangerous situations, but O'Hara said, "This is a little job we have to do tonight, and some of you women pile in there with the men." He sent the cars to *Tribune Alley* (also known as Newspaper Alley) where bundles of the Minneapolis daily papers were being packaged for distribution across the city under police escort.

The alley was a cul-de-sac, a perfect setting for a police ambush. When the unsuspecting strike-support group cruised into the loading area, the exit was sealed off by police and "special deputies." The union men and women were immediately cornered, and their opponents showed no mercy. Beaten with saps and night sticks, and pistol whipped, a half dozen had to be sent to the municipal hospital. Skoglund sat through the night with those who could be treated at the union headquarters. He recalled:

They brought the women in, and the other pickets from the *Tribune Alley*, and laid them down in rows in strike headquarters. All the women were mutilated and covered with blood, two or three with broken legs; several stayed unconscious for hours. ... When the strikers saw them lying round with nurses working over them, they got hold of clubs and swore they'd go down and wipe up the police and deputies. We told them, no, the Alley was a trap. 'We'll prepare for a real battle, and we'll pick our own battleground next time'.

"The fellows were wild there for a couple of days," Skoglund remembered. "You'd see men all over headquarters making saps and padding their caps for battle." When two policemen unwisely chose to barge into union headquarters on the pretext of looking for a kidnapped scab driver they were beaten senseless and sent out in an ambulance. Perhaps they were intending to rescue O'Hara who, when he turned up at the scene of his crime Sunday morning, was immediately seized and interrogated. Begging for mercy, he confessed to working for the police.

As the union began to marshal its forces, the old garage on Chicago Avenue was abuzz with the sound of lead pipes being cut into serviceable lengths and

two-by-twos fashioned into crude clubs. A truckload of wooden saps manufactured for the “deputies” by the Clark Woodenware Company was highjacked, the weapons brought to 1900 Chicago Avenue. One elderly supporter of Local 574 tore out the spokes of the stairway banister in his house, bringing the make-shift clubs to strike headquarters in a child’s wagon. Maloney noted that the mood of the strikers hardened after the *Tribune* Alley ambush: “In my opinion the weekend activity at 1900 Chicago was prompted not only in anticipation of what was ahead but actually by what had [occurred]. ... the employers were ready and determined to kill if needed to maintain their control. I was determined to make them prove it and so it was with so many men at that time. They knew what to expect on Monday or the next day and they were ready to ‘go for broke.’” With 1,000 National Guard troops poised for entry into Minneapolis, and Police Chief Johannes swearing in hundreds of new officers, union militants had a good idea of what they were up against. There was a lot of talk of a General Strike throughout working-class Minneapolis.⁸⁶

The Communist League of America cadres on the Strike Committee never agitated for a violent confrontation, but they knew that it was likely and prepared for it. If the union could pick the battleground and exploit an element of surprise, its chances of coming out on top in any battle with police and “special deputies” would be better. Farrell Dobbs explained: “We selected the market where there would be plenty of room.” The Central Labor Union AFL building happened to be strategically located at the edge of the Market District, and its “coffee station” was a place where cruising pickets dropped in for refreshment and talk. On Sunday 20 May 1934 hundreds of vehicles stopped in at the CLU building, their five or six Local 574 members/supporters ducking in for an ostensible coffee. But the departing cars and trucks left with far fewer passengers. In this way, unbeknownst to observing police and Citizens’ Alliance informants, 600 union supporters, all armed with clubs, were assembled in the AFL hall basement. A small group of pickets appeared in the market at 4 A.M., Monday morning, while other unionists and their allies fanned out unobtrus-

86 On O’Hara and *Tribune* Alley see Walker, *American City*, 107–111; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 150; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 79–82; United States Senate, 74th Congress, Second Session on Senate Resolution 266, *Violations of Free Speech and Assembly and Interference with Rights of Labor* (Washington: Government Printing, 1936), 44–45; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 236–237; Scholl, “Socialist Women and Labor Struggles,” 21; A Striker, “Minneapolis Shows the Way,” *The Militant*, 26 May 1934; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 95, 128; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal: The Age of Roosevelt, Volume 2* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1959), 387; Maloney interviewed by Duffy and Miller, 10 July 1979, Transcript, 3, Box 2, File: “Minneapolis Teamsters Strike 1934,” Maloney Papers, MNHS.

ively around the district. At the Chicago Avenue headquarters, 900 men waited in anticipation. Women's Auxiliary members took over all the regular strike headquarters' functions.

The strike leadership took into account the possibility of the police using firearms and decided that the best way to minimize the risk would be to engage the cops in close quarters. Accordingly, Local 574's strategists loaded a truck with 25 pickets ready to crash into the middle of the police detachment in the market. Driven by a fearless teamster, Bob Bell, the truck bore a sign proclaiming, "All organized labor help spring the trap. Rid the city of rats." Dobbs, the Dunne brothers, and the other strike leaders hoped that by surprising the police and getting close enough with them to engage in hand-to-hand combat, the chances of gunplay would be lessened considerably. In a chaotic mêlée the cops would be reluctant to fire into the crowd, fearful that they might shoot fellow officers or "special deputies." The army of redressers – strikers, supporters, sympathetic workers from other unions, and legions of the unemployed – was readied "to give the cops some surprises." Behind the scenes, the strike leadership pressured Olson to keep the National Guard out of sight, arguing that its involvement in the conflict would only inflame the situation and lead to even worse violence.⁸⁷

Discipline seems to have been more relaxed among the police and "special deputies." Feeling their oats after Saturday's exploits, the cops and their "citizen's army" were confident that they could again scatter the pickets. The prospect of participating in another easy rout attracted a variety of anti-union types ranging from paid thugs to successful professionals. Many Greek fraternity boys were said to have "rushed down to scab headquarters," eager for the chance to humiliate their "social inferiors." Young playboys from the fashionable Lowry Hill district strutted about the Citizens' Alliance headquarters at the West Hotel and the Committee of Twenty-Five's Hennepin Avenue rooms. These "foppish" first citizens enjoyed their "deputization," reveling in a kind of "Skull and Bones high spirit" according to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. "Booted, six-shooters at belt ... the flashier of them strode about ... getting the heft of new ax handles."

Some of those who looked forward to playing their part in the liberation of Market Square appeared in sporting attire on Monday morning. One wore an old football helmet, while Alfred Lindley, a prominent socialite, appeared in the ranks of the "specials" decked out in jodhpurs and a polo hat. The sight of this

87 For the union preparations outlined in the above paragraphs see Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 82–83; Walker, *American City*, 113–114; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 98.

elite garb infuriated strikers and their plebeian allies, many of whom no doubt thought that for people like this “the business of clubbing down working-class sheep” was “a bit of a lark.” But the police and their deputized “law and order brigade” who milled about the market at dawn underestimated their adversaries. Later that morning, polo hats and “special deputies” badges were collected as trophies and taken back to strike headquarters to be put on display.⁸⁸

Minnesota’s stormy Farmer-Labor congressman, Francis Shoemaker, given to grandstanding and other acts of adventurism that were anything but appreciated by the strike leadership,⁸⁹ nevertheless illustrated the anger evident among the strikers and their sympathizers. He appeared at the market around 6 AM, and was one of the first arrested. Brandishing a broom handle, he harangued and threatened “coppers,” “scabs” and others, warning them that if they were caught in “rat traps” they would get a retributive thrashing for the violence they had inflicted on those lured into *Tribune Alley* on Saturday night. Shoemaker was promptly taken into police custody, charged with disorderly conduct, jailed, and then released on bond later that day.

The congressman missed the main attraction, a pitched battle that began soon after Shoemaker was hauled away by the police. Fighting commenced at an almost ritually understood announcement of the hostilities. Scab trucks drove into the market, their windshields and windows screened with chicken wire, and pulled up to the loading docks. Hauling a few token crates, one of the trucks started to move out, and was immediately set upon by the strikers, who forced the driver to flee on foot. Disciplined pickets separated the “special deputies” from the police, and then the union’s reserves began marching on the market, four abreast, clubs dangling at their sides, a seemingly endless and menacing onslaught. An initial contingent came from the basement of the nearby Central Labor Union, followed by a second phalanx from the Chicago Avenue strike headquarters. The “socialite specials,” expecting “a little picnic with a mad rabble,” began “to get some idea what the score was.” They “broke into headlong flight with hardly a scuffle.”

With the deputies dispersed, the police rushed in their newly-recruited, but ill-prepared, officers from various Minneapolis precincts. As police and pickets

88 Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 83; Kramer, “Dunne Boys of Minneapolis,” 392–393; Schlesinger, *Coming of the New Deal*, 387; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 150; C.H., “Sidelights from the Great Battle of the Minneapolis Workers,” *The Militant*, 16 June 1934; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 95, 122; Walker, *American City*, 113–116, 121; Maloney interviewed by Duffy and Miller, 10 July 1979, Transcript, 5–11, Box 2, File: “Minneapolis Teamsters Strike 1934,” Maloney Papers, MNHS.

89 Shoemaker was actually banned from strike headquarters. See Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 88–89, 111; “Shoemaker Jailed After Strike Row,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 21 May 1934.

battled, it became clear that in many skirmishes the cops were getting the worst of it. Local 574's fighters, cheered on by boisterous crowds of bystanders, made sallies against the surrounded police, separating a few out from the ranks the better to physically engage with them. For two hours it was a stand-off as pickets charged police, cops regrouped, and then retaliated. Rocks, clubs, and other debris were thrown at the police. Frustrated, trapped, and much the worse for wear, the police eventually unholstered their firearms; they pulled out sawed-off shotguns when one of their number was slashed in the face with a knife. This was the signal for Bob Bell to come barreling into the police "like a bat out of hell, with his horn honking." As the cops scattered and Local 574 members leapt from the truck, the fighting intensified. "It was almost a civil war," remembered one Minnesota striker, badly beaten by the police in the ensuing fray.

As this was underway, Clara Dunne and Marvel Scholl headed a Women's Auxiliary march of 500–700 to City Hall. They defiantly "broke every traffic rule in Minneapolis." Demanding to meet with the mayor, who refused to see even a small delegation, the women nonetheless threw a scare into civic officials. Gun-toting police barred the women from the seat of municipal power, but the throng gathered on the sidewalks heard a fiery speech from Auxiliary member Frieda Charles, and learned of the women's demands: fire the Chief of Police, Mike Johannes; withdraw all "special deputies"; and stop interfering with pickets.

Eventually, an Assistant Police Inspector withdrew the police from the Market District, their orderly retreat aided by a contingent of "special deputies." No trucks moved. More than thirty cops were injured, the bulk of them requiring hospitalization. For once, there were more injuries to police than strikers. Bandaged workers unlucky enough to run into cops on Minneapolis streets after the affray were arrested. Johannes put the entire Minneapolis police force on 24-hour duty, and the Citizens' Alliance intensified its recruitment of "special deputies."

Twelve prominent Minneapolis citizens petitioned Washington to intervene, have the Regional Labor Board end the strike, and "restore peace and security to the citizens of Minneapolis." These worthies were distressed that the actions of "several thousand strikers had resulted in various manufacturing plants being shut down." This Group of Twelve had little faith in Governor Olson, and feared that calling out the National Guard would "result in further disorders, possible bloodshed or loss of life." Particularly irksome was the threat of "sympathetic strikes ... launched by milk, ice, and coal wagon drivers."

Labor unions, outraged by the massive police strikebreaking intervention, rallied to support Local 574. The city's building trades, 35,000 strong, declared

a sympathetic general strike. Electricians, at the suggestion of two Communist League of America members, Oscar Coover and Chester Johnson, marched in a body to 1900 Chicago Avenue to offer their assistance. The painters' union did likewise. Iron workers soon declared themselves on strike. Other unions announced that their members would be "on holiday" as long as the General Drivers' Union continued picketing. Meridel Le Sueur's notebooks capture, in their cryptic and chaotic condensation of the moment, something of its explosive context:

There was the strike ... the headquarters women working men singing Annie Laurie radio going ... young men in front ... The mass meeting going on downtown ... Now they are meeting thousands ... with the feeling broken down completely of getting into a middle-class society ... and the language was racy and vulgar and that peculiar smile of the worker ... knowing ... he has not gotten into the money world.

Round one, however confusing, had gone to Local 574, and the class struggle in Minneapolis was widening.⁹⁰

On Tuesday morning, 22 May 1934, a huge crowd, estimated at 20,000–30,000, gathered in the market. There was a carnivalesque atmosphere and many "holidaying" workers were present. News photographers were everywhere and a local radio station was broadcasting live from the site. Movie newsreel crews were on hand to record the day's activities for short films that were shown in theatres prior to the main feature. The two sides took up their

90 The above paragraphs draw on A Striker, "Minneapolis Shows the Way: Militant Mass Picket Line Routs Scabs, Cops, Special Deputies, and Thugs and Stops All Commercial Transport; Building Trades in Sympathy Strike; Women's Auxiliary Active in Fight; General Strike Sentiment [sic] Growing; Workers' Spirit Soars," *The Militant*, 26 May 1934; Auxiliary Member, "Women Active on the Firing Line," *The Militant*, 2 June 1934; A Sympathetic Striker, "Support from Other Unions," *The Militant*, 2 June 1934; Maloney interviewed by Duffy and Miller, 10 July 1979, Transcript, 1–28, quote on civil war at 3, File: "Minneapolis Teamsters Strike 1934," Box 2, Maloney Papers, MNHS; Maloney interviewed by Salerno, Rachleff, and Seaveron, 1–4 April 1988, Transcript, 119, Maloney Biographical File, Box 1, David Riehle Papers, MNHS; Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 198; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 83–87; Walker, *American City*, 113–117; Scholl, "Socialist Women and Labor Struggles," 21; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 97–98; Tselos, "The Labor Movement of Minneapolis in the 1930s," 227; "Strikers Fight Pitched Battle, 37 in Hospital, Officer Stabbed," "Shoemaker Jailed After Strike Row," "Group of 12 Appeals to Washington," and "Building Trades Vote Sympathy Walkout to Involve 35,000," *Minneapolis Journal*, 21 May 1934; Meridel Le Sueur, "Notebooks, Volume 8, 1934–1935," dated entry 29 May 1934, 18, Box 26, Le Sueur Papers, MNHS.

positions in the market before dawn, and stood their ground defiantly for a few hours. The police announced that the streets would be kept open and, counting “special deputies,” claimed to have 1500–2000 dedicated to this purpose patrolling the Market District. Regrouping after their ignominious defeat on Monday, the “special deputies” were organized militarily into sections, each accompanied by a uniformed police officer. Employers proclaimed they would be moving perishables out of market warehouses, while Local 574 was committed to stopping all such trucking activity. The union clearly had the support of the vast bulk of Minneapolis’s workers, organized and unorganized, employed and unemployed, on strike or just taking a short “vacation.” The huge numbers present, however, limited the possibility of the kind of coordinated planning that had strategically orchestrated union ranks on Monday. As Dobbs later noted, “A planned battle was almost impossible on that day.”⁹¹

Accounts vary as to exactly how events unfolded. One version has it all starting quickly when a crate of tomatoes that a scab was about to load on a truck was seized by a picket and thrown through a plate glass window. “Instantly,” Dobbs claimed, “it became a free for all.” Strikers and sympathizers thrashed the volunteers in the strikebreaking “citizen’s army,” while the vastly outnumbered uniformed police initially stood aside. A newspaper report claimed that, “At no time was there any real clash between regular police and strikers,” as the latter concentrated on punishing the special “deputies.” Maloney confirmed that the cops were largely a non-presence: “they did not participate ... I did not see a [uniformed policeman] ... involved that Tuesday morning, not one.” There were of course inevitable skirmishes with the “harness bulls,” the working-class designation of police, but these fights never escalated to the level of violence directed at the “specials.” As long as they were reluctant to use their guns, the cops were no match for the pickets, union supporters, unemployed, and other Local 574 sympathizers, many of whom carried clubs, lead pipes, baseball bats, saps, and rubber hose lengths filled with sand and plugged with lead.

When a second detail of police arrived on the scene, seemingly without instructions as to their orientation to the volunteer “citizen’s army,” things became more confused. The “deputies,” led by retired colonels and majors, were by all accounts quickly dispersed, dropping their clubs and badges in order to blend anonymously into the hostile crowd. The skirmishes in the morning merely heralded the *grand finale*, which broke out about noon after a club fight between a pro-union woman and a “deputized female” ended with the latter

91 Tselos, “The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s,” 224; “Shoemaker Jailed After Strike Row,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 21 May 1934; Walker, *American City*, 117–118; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 87–88.

laid out. This produced "a roar that was heard for blocks." Bill Kitt described how a crowd of Local 574 pickets and sympathizers surged into the street:

The specials made no effort to stem the tide but turned and fled, tossing away their clubs and badges as they ran. Many were cornered in stalls and blind alleys and laid out three deep. Clubs swung everywhere as the fighting pickets surged irresistibly through the rows of stalls smashing down all opposition. Several truckloads of deputies attempting to escape were surrounded and transferred to the mounting casualty list. In desperation the regular cops drove their cars into the ranks of the strikers in a vain effort to stop them. Ambulances worked overtime taking away the specials.

Kitt closed his account by noting that the "deputies," 50 of whom were injured, were "completely licked." Meridel Le Sueur observed in her notebooks that many businessmen who had looked forward to putting the truckers in their place "found out it was a bloody matter to defend their marketing world."

All accounts agree that the "special deputies" were routed. A Minneapolis Labor Board report of 13 May 1934 declared that as soon as the battle broke out "rocks and clubs [were] flying through the air." The deputies dispersed, many of them falling or being knocked down, while "the mob trampled those underfoot while others kicked the prostrate forms." "A Striker" wrote to *The Militant* that, "The cowardly sluggers [took] to their heels and [ran]." But their dress and demeanor made some of them easily identifiable, and in one case with fatal consequences. C. Arthur Lyman, vice-president of the American Ball Company and the long-serving attorney of the Citizens' Alliance, was a 44-year old father of four with an extensive military history as a field artillery volunteer. A leader in the Minneapolis Community Fund and the Rotary Club, as well as a central figure in Saint Mark's Church, Lyman was a member of Kappa Alpha fraternity. After strikers dispersed the "specials," Lyman apparently sought refuge in a grocery store. In spite of his volunteer military service, Lyman definitely chose the wrong footwear for a marketplace clash with strikers. Mrs. George Fahr, wife of a University of Minnesota medical school faculty member who was one of the few women on the employers' committee (and a signatory of the Group of Twelve's appeal to Washington), described Lyman's unfortunate demise: "I saw Arthur Lyman come, being pushed forward by the crowd and trying to push the strikers back. The floor of the market was cobblestone, and Arthur had worn mountaineering boots with metal cleats in them. Nothing would have been more lethal than those boots were, and the strikers pressed upon him and he slipped and went down and they were on him like a pack of wolves." His skull

fractured in the violent market fracas, Lyman was rushed to hospital, where he was pronounced dead shortly after his arrival.

The pillar of respectable Minneapolis society was one of two “special deputies” who perished in what came to be known as “The Battle of Deputies Run.” The other was Peter Erath, a man of more plebeian stock than Lyman, who worked as a laborer before setting up a marginal coal and wood hauling business. Like Lyman, Erath suffered a fractured skull and loss of blood, but hung on under the care of General Hospital physicians for a few days before succumbing to his injuries.

After “The Battle of Deputies Run,” the more stalwart “specials” who had not simply fled, returned to their headquarters, tending to their injured compatriots. “Our fellows were beaten up and bleeding and in a terrible condition,” one “deputy” later reported. Among the crowd, cheers erupted whenever a fleeing “special” was knocked to the ground. Police, who acted with some restraint and, among the ranks, had perhaps shown their contempt for the “volunteer specials” who proved so inept in the heat of battle, were less vilified than these scorned “deputies.” A letter to the editor in the *Minneapolis Journal* stated: “it is a well-known fact that the strikers as well as their friends held the regular police in high regard and esteem, while they looked upon the special police as nothing but mercenaries.” The hiring of these deputized “special” strikebreakers, according to this commentator, turned public sympathy away from the employers. “The damn fools who went out as deputies got what was coming to ‘em,” snorted many Minneapolis citizens who, otherwise, claimed to be above aligning with either capital or labor in the spring of 1934.⁹²

92 The above paragraphs draw on Walker, *American City*, 117–121, 176; Meridel Le Sueur, “Notebooks, Volume 8, 1934–1935,” dated entry 29 May 1934, 18, Box 26, Le Sueur Papers, MNHS; “Statement Made by Labor Board, 13 May, Battle of Deputies Run,” 12 and “Skoglund,” [Typescript of Skoglund’s notes on Battle of Deputies Run], File: “American City Strike Notes: Dobbs, Skoglund,” Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS; Maloney interviewed by Salerno, Rachleff, and Seaverson, 5–9 April 1988, Transcript, 133–135, Maloney Biographical File, 1911–1999, Box 1, Riehle Papers, MNHS; A Striker, “At the Minneapolis City Market – ‘The Battle of Deputy Run,’” *The Militant*, 2 June 1934; Hagen E. Johnson, “Strike Viewpoints: Letter to the Editor,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 27 May 1934; William Kitt, “A Lesson in Law and Order,” *The Militant*, 2 June 1934; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 88; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 99, 119–127; Tselos, “The Labor Movement in Minneapolis in the 1930s,” 225. Mrs. Fahr’s approving commentary on her friend Arthur Lyman can be contrasted with the less laudatory appraisal in C.H., “Sidelights from the Great Battle of the Minneapolis Workers,” *The Militant*, 16 June 1934. For a discussion of Lyman see “Rites Set Tomorrow for Young Business Man Serving as Special Officer,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 23 May 1934, and for Erath, “Special Policeman Injured in Strike Riot is Near Death,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 25 May 1934.

Many fighting for the cause of Local 574 also suffered injury. A striker known as "Big Harold" whose scalp was ripped open from his forehead to the crown of his head, was stitched up at the union headquarters by Dr. McCrimmon and Marvel Scholl. The only anesthesia available came out of a whisky bottle.

"The Battle of Deputies Run," an intense and deadly confrontation, was essentially over in short order. There was no question that the General Drivers' Union came out on top. "In less than an hour after the battle started," claimed Dobbs in *Teamster Rebellion*, "there wasn't a cop to be seen in the market, and pickets were directing traffic in the now peaceful district. For good measure all police were run out of the vicinity of the strike headquarters and they were kept away for the duration of the walkout." According to Bill Kitt, "the strikers had complete control." Local 574 patrolled the Market District to prevent looting and wanton property damage. Minor clashes continued throughout the day as pickets, according to one source, "continued to mop up, or settle individual accounts in alleys and bars" until ten o'clock in the evening. Some cops were reported to be hard to locate for up to twelve hours, resurfacing only after things settled down.

Bill Brown, prone to hyperbole, was adamant that, "we could have taken over the city after the Battle of Deputies Run. We controlled it. All that would have been necessary 'to seize power' would have been to urge a few thousand strikers to capture the Court House. That would have done it. ... the union might have made me soviet mayor, huh? and Skoglund over there commissar of police." This was the Citizens' Alliance's worst nightmare, one that its forces believed reflected the aims of the General Drivers' Union's Trotskyist leadership. But CLA members were "revolutionaries enough to tell the difference between a militant strike and a revolution." Their goal all along had been to establish "a truck drivers' union in Minneapolis" that took in all the workers in the industry and was able to stand up to the bosses.⁹³

93 The above paragraphs draw on Scholl, "Socialist Women and Labor Struggles," 21; Walker, *American City*, 118–127; Kitt, "A Lesson in Law and Order," *The Militant*, 2 June 1934; Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 200; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 99; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 88–91. Note the discussion of dual power in Redfield, *The Great Minneapolis Strikes*, 16–17. After the May 1934 violence, the issue of arbitration and federal conciliation or mediation was ever-present, an explicit attempt to derail the militant leadership of the insurgent truckers. The first mediator sent into the fray was B.M. Marshman, Commissioner of Conciliation of the United States Labor Department, who appeared in Minneapolis on 22 May 1934. See "U.S. Sends Mediator to Strike Scene: Conciliator Will Act if Board Fails," *Minneapolis Journal*, 22 May 1934; "Mediator Marshman Hopes for Way Out in Strike Impasse," *Minneapolis Journal*, 23 May 1934.

11 May 1934: Settlement Secured; Victory Postponed

As the forces opposing unionism of the Minneapolis truckers gathered in the aftermath of the Battle of Deputies Run, the most rabid of the city's anti-union trucking employers contemplated how best to fight back. Some wanted to throw more police into the field and move trucks at any cost. Others apparently proposed luring the strike leadership into ostensible negotiations at their West Hotel headquarters, only to then arrange a mass arrest. Governor Olson, shaken by the violence in Minneapolis's market and facing harsh criticism from reactionary local opponents as well as the *Chicago Tribune*, requested a temporary, 24-hour truce. Local 574 held a mass rally Wednesday evening, 23 May 1934, at which well over 5,000 men, women, and children roared their approval for continuing the struggle. The event was advertised with circulars headlined, "NO SURRENDER." Furious applause greeted every speaker save for Olson's Lieutenant-Governor, K.K. Solberg, whose wishes of "God speed" produced only stony silence. "There was a wild free spirit abroad that night at the Parade," according to Left Oppositionist C.R. Hedlund, "a spirit surging with hope" that "welded together a solidarity of the workers of Minneapolis."

During the Wednesday armistice, "cops and businessmen, white-faced with venom," glared at unionists handing out leaflets or the small groups of pickets remaining on the streets. Moderates among the trucking owners managed to work out an agreement not to transport goods if the union consented to remove the mass pickets and negotiate through the Regional Labor Board. Olson put the National Guard, 3700 strong, on alert, although he agreed to continue to keep the militia harnessed indoors as a concession to an angered union leadership. Chief of Police Mike Johannes thought that the military would be necessary to deal with the influx of "communists and sluggers" from Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis and elsewhere. State officials were informed that, "a large number of lawless and desperate characters were drifting into the city from all parts of the country in an effort to take over the strike for their own purposes." Never substantiated, such claims of a "Red menace" about to overrun Minneapolis exacerbated tensions and ratcheted up pressure to bring the strike to an end.⁹⁴

Over the next few days, the Dunne brothers, Skoglund, Brown, and others parlayed with the trucking bosses at the Nicollet Hotel, facilitated by gov-

94 "Johannes to Reject any Proposals to Extend Armistice," "Reds and Sluggers in City, Chief Says," "Troops Smash Strike Siege at Toledo Plant," and "Plans to Return Motor Transport in City at 9 PM – Regional Board Rushes Efforts, Abandons Formal Sessions to Confer with Groups," *Minneapolis Journal*, 24 May 1934; "Fresh Troops Relieve Guard in Toledo Riot," *Minneapolis Journal*, 25 May 1934.

ernment mediators. Regional Labor Board officials took notes back and forth from the employers' committee and the General Drivers' Union, a "diplomatic shuttle between combatants." The truce was extended and some progress recorded. Following the precedent of the coal yards strike, Local 574 withdrew the demand for the closed shop, but required *de facto* recognition of the union. The union organizing committee was adamant that the business committee's insistence that any strikers "guilty of any crime" would not have to be taken back was merely an attempt by the bosses to "frame and convict on false charges any man whom they wanted to get rid of in the union." The employers yielded on this crucial issue, agreeing to reinstate all striking workers.⁹⁵

The Law and Order Committee of the Citizens' Alliance, dubbed the 'Low and Odor' by workers sympathetic to the truckers and their union drive, offered \$20,000 for information on what the strike leaders unsentimentally referred to as apprehension "of the exterminator of a couple of rats." In the aftermath of the May strike, there was an attempt to try and convict Local 574's Emanuel "Happy" Holstein, as well as a youthful "mentally deficient" strike supporter, for murdering Arthur Lyman. Holstein, a Chippewa truck driver and leading figure in the Strike Committee, was arrested. A militant Trade Union Defense Committee was immediately formed. It bailed Holstein out of jail on a \$10,000 bond, secured by putting the Milk Drivers' Union hall up as collateral. The charges against Holstein and the young strike supporter were widely regarded as frame-ups, and both were eventually acquitted after trials. There were other legal proceedings. With 43 arrested strikers and Local 574 supporters still in jail, unable to cough up the \$200 bail requirements, the first of approximately 200 trials commenced in the courts as pickets and others faced a variety of charges from disorderly conduct to assault. Dozens would be convicted, but the bulk of those brought to trial had their charges dismissed; when found guilty, strikers often received terms in the workhouse ranging from ten to forty-five days.⁹⁶

95 Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 89–91; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 99–102; "Workers Committee Will Submit Peace Proposals to Union But No Recommendation," *Minneapolis Journal*, 25 May 1934.

96 Walker, *American City*, 122–127; Walker, "Holstein Frame-Up," in File: "Notes Local 574 and Strike," Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS; "Riot Trials Open; First of 200 in Courts," *Minneapolis Journal*, 25 May 1934; "Truck Driver Gets 45 Days," *Minneapolis Journal*, 27 May 1934; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 89–91; "Conciliator Will Act If Board Fails," and "Both Sides Avoid Major Encounters," *Minneapolis Journal*, "PM – Regional Board Rushes Efforts, Abandons Formal Sessions to Confer with Groups," *Minneapolis Journal*, 24 May 1934; "First of 200 in Court," *Minneapolis Journal*, 25 May 1934; "Truck Driver Gets 45 Days," *Minneapolis Journal*, 27 May 1934; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 89–91; C.H., "Sidelights from the Great Battle of the Minneapolis Workers," *The Militant*, 16 June 1934; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters*

In the end, negotiations to end the May strike bogged down. The sticking point for the employers, as it had been for Dan Tobin, was the issue of “inside workers.” As James Rorty noted, “The employers immediately saw the implied threat: if Local 574 took in chicken pickers and fruit handlers, what was there to prevent their encompassing the entire body of unorganized workers in the city, building a union, a one-big union, that would hold the destinies of Minneapolis in its powerful hands?” Industrial unionism, the rallying cry of Minneapolis militants, was fiercely resisted by both the employers and the AFL tops. Pressed by Governor Olson, Roosevelt’s mediators, and the employers’ committee, the Trotskyist leadership of Local 574 ended up accepting an agreement that essentially conferred union recognition, provided wage and hour arbitration based on past concessions, and ensured reinstatement of all strikers. Local 574 considered this a limited victory that sacrificed “no fundamentals.”

Governor Olson, along with Regional Labor Board officials, worked overtime to come up with a formulation on recognition that the trucking bosses could live with, but which also seemed to meet the union’s bottom line. “All members of the General Drivers and Helpers Union Local No. 574 in dealing with employers may be represented by the officers of such Union.” The wording – *may* – was indeed inconclusive, but Olson assured the union that the settlement covered all workers in its ranks. In discussions with the employers, however, Olson let them interpret this crucial passage to mean that they would have the upper hand when it came to determining who was covered by the settlement. A subsequent paragraph in the agreement read: “The term ‘employees’ as used herein shall include truck drivers and helpers, and such other persons as are ordinarily engaged in the trucking operations of the business of the individual employer.” The definition of “trucking operations” was open ended enough that the bosses could argue that this excluded “inside workers” from union protections and representations. But it was also possible to interpret the settlement’s wording more inclusively. A third clause stipulated that all disagreements were to be resolved through a Board of Arbitration, but what issues could be addressed and how was posed vaguely at best. Again, there was a lack of precision in the language used on dispute resolution, which would ultimately prove contentious.

As a package, however, despite the ambiguities, the General Drivers’ Union leadership judged that the proposed settlement achieved significant advances. The agreement seemed to include both union recognition and a dispute resol-

Strike of 1934, 99–102; and on later attempted ‘frame-ups’ involving those charged with the murder of Lyman see Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 18–23; “Minneapolis Notes: Plot Frame-Up in Mpls,” *The Militant*, 23 June 1934. Note as well “The ‘Low and Odor’ League,” *The Organizer*, 25 June 1934.

ution mechanism, paving the way toward realizing collective bargaining rights in the industry. After a polarizing strike that divided Minneapolis, leaving one prominent citizen and another “special deputy” dead in “eleven days of the fiercest class warfare in the Northwest,” Olson’s settlement solution seemed to be worth seizing. It was apparent that a final, air-tight establishment of industrial unionism in the critically important trucking industry was being postponed, but those struggling to secure this end regarded what had been achieved in May 1934 as considerable. “Recognizing the need for recoupment and consolidation of actual gains as a basis for future struggle,” the strike leadership urged acceptance of the Olson/Labor Board-orchestrated agreement at a Local 574 ratification meeting. In doing so, it acknowledged that the General Drivers’ Union’s breakthrough was by no means a complete victory. No written collective bargaining document was signed between the union and the employers, since Local 574 dropped this demand. All that existed was a consent order issued by the Regional Labor Board and signed by both parties, each with their own view of what constituted “trucking operations.” Reliance on arbitration only delayed a final reckoning because, once again, labor and capital had different understandings of what this meant, and the settlement agreement never clarified crucial considerations.

At issue in the way in which arbitration was understood by labor and capital, respectively, was a fundamental divergence of class perspectives. Employers insisted that arbitration would only be entered into when employees at a particular trucking concern expressed their firm-specific complaints relating to wages and conditions, which would then be submitted to the Regional Labor Board to be arbitrated by a panel consisting, among others, of representatives from Local 574 and the specific trucking company. This individual firm resolution mechanism effectively nullified the existence of the Union, since it refused to cede to the recognized body of organized labor in the trucking industry the right to arbitrate issues of wages and conditions on behalf of its membership as a whole, restricting all disputatious cases to specific workers and particular employers. The General Drivers’ Union saw arbitration as operating very differently. Local 574’s view was that the Board of Arbitration must be a standing body empowered to decide general issues of wages and conditions of employment within the trucking sector.⁹⁷

97 The above paragraphs draw on Rorty, *Where Life is Better*, 191; Walker, *American City*, 124–128; Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 196–200; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 98–104, 136–140; Scholl, “Socialist Women and Labor Struggles,” 22; “Terms of Strike Peace,” and “Thousands Back at Work, Moving Mountains of Goods,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 26 May 1934; “Labor Board to Arbitrate Strike Issues,” *Minneapolis Journal*,

Some workers did argue that the strike must continue until a clear-cut victory was won. Sources as divergent as the *Minneapolis Journal* and the Communist Party insisted that ratification of the settlement, which took place over a marathon Local 574 session lasting many hours, was in jeopardy. Militants clamored for a General Strike to be called, and opposition to ending the confrontation was at times quite strong. Yet in the end, as the *Minneapolis Journal* reported, "The strike leaders favored acceptance and urged the men to realize that it offered the union some important concessions. The plea was made that the agreement is 'an important first step' and it was pointed out that rejection meant a long and perhaps uncertain battle. It was the plea of the strike leaders that finally brought ratification by the big crowd." The insurgent truckers trusted those – the Dunnes, Carl Skoglund, Farrell Dobbs, and Bill Brown – who led the fight that made Minneapolis front-page news across the country, establishing the local union's national reputation as a militant opposition against employer intransigence. This largely Trotskyist rank-and-file leadership, reviled by the Citizens' Alliance as hell-bent on the immediate creation of a Soviet Republic, pursued an uncompromisingly effective strike strategy. Rather than risk a potentially lethal confrontation with the National Guard, a battle that could easily have been lost, thereby nullifying the limited but significant gains of the Nicolett Hotel negotiations, those guiding Local 574 were convinced that it was time to pause and consolidate what, at considerable cost, had already been achieved.

An immediate consequence of the May 1934 strike was that Local 574 was flooded with new, previously unorganized, workers. By the summer, Local 574 would boast a membership of 7,000. The Minneapolis working class had faced down a formidable adversary, demonstrating a capacity to triumph over both ideological and physical attack. As Cannon wrote in *The Militant*:

What is out of the ordinary in Minneapolis, what is most important in this respect, is that while the Minneapolis strike began with violent assaults on the strikers, it did not end there. ... 'Business men' volunteering to put the workers in their place and college boys out for a lark – as special deputies – to say nothing of uniformed cops, handed over their badges and fled in terror before the mass fury of the aroused workers. ... Here was a

27 May 1934. Local 574 militant and picket captain Jack Maloney would later insist that Olson "flat out double-crossed us" and that the Farmer-Labor Governor hoodwinked the strike committee on the meaning of "inside workers." See Maloney interview with Salerno, Rachleff, and Seaverson, 5–9 April 1988, Transcript, 136–137, Box 1, Maloney Biographical File, 1911–1999, Riehle Papers, MNHS.

demonstration that the American workers are willing and able to fight in their own interests. Nothing is more important than this, for, in the last analysis, everything depends on it.

"This was an example of mass action," Cannon concluded, "which points the way forward for the future victorious struggles of the American workers." While Minneapolis's Trotskyist vanguard never formally called a General Strike, its determined struggle produced a massive wave of sympathy and support within the working class. This effectively resulted in a widespread municipal work stoppage. In a few short months during the winter and spring of 1934, thousands of workers signed up with an American Federation of Labor trade union known to be officially opposed to organizing the unorganized. None of the other epic labor battles of 1934 had achieved as much.⁹⁸

When a Citizens' Alliance stalwart, an old slouch hat concealing his countenance and an oversized raincoat draping his physique, slithered into the Monday 28 May 1934 mass ratification meeting of the General Drivers' Union, he was aghast at what he saw. "There were thousands and thousands of bums and hoodlums and Communists there," he insisted. "Agitators worked the crowd up to the highest pitch of mob fury. They shouted, sang, and yelled. It was really horrible." The ostensible cream of Minneapolis society, some of them having served as "special deputies," demanded new laws to curb the wanton violence of the strikers, and denounced Olson as having "called a meeting of the striking truck drivers at the theatre and told them to tighten their belts, arm themselves, and take what they wanted." Rumors circulated, even making their way to Roosevelt's Department of State, that Minneapolis had been overrun by 1500 Communist-imported thugs from Chicago. "Hopped up on cocaine," they were ostensibly the type responsible for killing Arthur Lyman. Rather than confront the actuality of class war in the City Market, a public space described by elite

98 The above paragraphs draw on *Minneapolis Journal* quoted in William F. Dunne and Morris Childs, *Permanent Counter-Revolution: The Role of the Trotskyites in the Minneapolis Strikes* (New York: Workers Library, 1934), 19–20; James P. Cannon, "Learn from Minneapolis!" *The Militant*, 26 May 1934; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 152–153; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 100; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 88. "K," in a telegram to *The Militant*, 26 May 1934, stated that, "The Communist League has raised the slogan of general strike throughout the twin cities and sentiment for it is spreading like wildfire," but Vincent Ray Dunne always maintained that this call for generalized work stoppages was never made, precisely because it would have drawn conservative AFL leaders into the strike committee and inevitably compromised the capacity of Trotskyists to lead the struggle to a positive conclusion. For a fuller discussion of this point see Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 230–233.

matron, Mrs. George Fahr, as “right in the heart of Minneapolis ... right in your lap,” many union opponents needed to conjure up an enemy that was imposed on them from outside of their customary social relations. Reality and fantasy converged as the Battle of Deputies Run confirmed class hatred on the part of many of the well-to-do, whose face-to-face encounter with proletarian insurgency cultivated irrational fear and loathing of combative workers.

Among the frenzied “mob,” however, perceptions were often more sedate. Many thought that “Minneapolis in time might [now] be made a tolerable place in which to live.” A strike settlement secured, the labor combatants of May 1934 went back to their workplaces, the drivers and helpers of Local 574 among them doing so, for the first time, under the modest terms of what they considered their first “union contract.” Robley Cramer used the *Minneapolis Labor Review* to trumpet the view that the strike and settlement constituted “the greatest victory over the Citizen’s Alliance in the history of the city.” Cannon wrote more prudently that, “The spirit of victory and achievement was in the air, although no attempt had been made by the leadership to exaggerate the gains of the first battle.”⁹⁹

Cannon and the national leadership of the Communist League of America were of course aware of Minneapolis developments in the first six months of 1934, kept apprised of the situation largely by mail. Preoccupied with the hotel workers’ strike during the February coal yards work stoppage, and moving on many other fronts when a fresh confrontation broke out in mid-May 1934, Cannon and the rest of the National Executive Committee in New York were certainly cognizant of the situation in Minneapolis. The extent to which Local 574 was about to become national news, however, had perhaps not registered decisively.¹⁰⁰

The Battle of Deputies Run changed all this, for the 22 May 1934 clash in Market Square put Minneapolis truckers and their struggle on the front pages of national newspapers, where it was discussed alongside General Strikes in Toledo and San Francisco. More importantly, perhaps, sensational newsreels “showed combat scenes filmed during the Tuesday battle. Workers everywhere

99 The above paragraphs draw on Walker, *American City*, 127–128; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 99–101, 126; Tselos, “The Labor Movement in Minneapolis in the 1930s,” 232–233, quoting Cramer and *Minneapolis Labor Review*, 1934; James P. Cannon, “Union Recognition Gained by Militant Minneapolis Battles: Victory is an Inspiration to Workers Everywhere,” *The Militant*, 2 June 1934.

100 National coverage of events in Minneapolis commenced in May and reached into August. Among many sources see, for instance, coverage in the *New York Times*, 22–25 May 1934; 10 July 1934; 16 July 1934; 18 July 1934; 21–22 July 1934; 27 July 1934; 5 August 1934; 12 August 1934.

reacted enthusiastically to the news. Audiences in movie houses broke out in cheers at the sight of pickets clubbing cops for a change, since in most strikes it was entirely the other way around." Offsetting the finger-pointing that flowed in the wake of B.J. Field's ill-advised leadership of the New York hotel workers, his obvious break from League discipline, and the ultimate February 1934 defeat of the food and restaurant union drive, developments in Minneapolis garnered the American Left Opposition considerable trade union credibility. Cannon would later write that after the Field fiasco there were those ready to write the Trotskyists off in terms of their "contacts and forces" in the labor movement. The Minneapolis organizing drive re-established a sense that, "The Trotskyists mean business. ... Serious people were attracted to the League, and our whole membership was stiffened with a new sense of discipline and responsibility toward the organization." All of this combined to impress upon Cannon and others in New York "their first inkling of the full scope of the Teamster strike." As the Minneapolis truckers' strike negotiations unfolded quickly in the aftermath of the violence in the market, with the National Guard mobilized to be a serious threat to the union, a great deal hung in the balance.

Both Local 574's leadership and the CLA's in New York, were well aware that Olson, Roosevelt's Labor Board officials, and the employers were deliberately issuing contradictory assurances, utilizing ambiguous formulations, and employing various other trickeries to demobilize and demoralize strikers, re-establishing bourgeois order in Minneapolis. The Left Opposition's role in this dramatic class battle was denounced and dissected by opponents as divergent as the Communist Party and the Citizens' Alliance. Cannon and the rest of the New York CLA leadership recognized that they must do whatever they could to contribute to a victory in Minneapolis and "take responsibility" for the organizing drive's outcome. Communication by mail was obviously not effective, as most decisions had to be made quickly and only those on the spot could possibly have all the information necessary to get things right.

The CLA was starved for resources, chronically short of funds. As Cannon noted, "we were still so poor that we couldn't afford a telephone in the office." Yet the League went to the extraordinary expense of flying Cannon to Minneapolis. It was probably the veteran revolutionist's first time on an airplane: as a Wobbly agitator he rode the rails to get to strikes, and even as a high-ranking Communist en route to Comintern gatherings in Moscow over the course of the 1920s, his transatlantic travel and traversing of Europe was done by steamship and railroad. Cannon walked into a meeting of the Organizing Committee at 1900 Chicago Avenue, looked at Carl Skoglund, and asked rhetorically, "What the hell kind of trouble are you getting us into now." It was a Cannonesque kind

of icebreaker, and Skogie's smile conveyed to the young militants in the room that this new arrival from New York was their "kind of people."¹⁰¹

Cannon endorsed the strike organizers' decision to settle for a limited victory in late May 1934. Ray Dunne and Carl Skoglund came to the conclusion that they had erred in not involving the national leadership more directly in the events unfolding between January and May 1934 in Minneapolis. A part of their reluctance stemmed from a sense that in New York Cannon was overwhelmed with "troubles in the center," a reference to the conflicts that had long raged on the National Executive Committee, which the Minneapolis trade unionists regarded as emanating from "a petty-bourgeois grouping." They were reticent to load "onto New York local problems that would only add" to Cannon's difficulties. They were almost certainly unaware that the Shachtman-Cannon impasse of 1931–33 was about to be transcended in the new context of 1934's mass struggles. The failure to involve the New York CLA center in the May strike settlement negotiations deprived local leaders of valuable input from Cannon and others. The agreements reached involving Governor Olson, Local 574 representatives such as Bill Brown and Farrell Dobbs, and the Employers' Advisory Committee papered over the irreconcilable differences between militant workers and their Citizens' Alliance adversaries. When Cannon appeared at 1900 Chicago Avenue on either Thursday or Friday, 24–25 May 1934, he was immediately made a part of the strike settlement negotiations, caucusing with the Dunnes, Skoglund, Dobbs, and Brown. But the foundations of a settlement were largely in place and, as Philip A. Korth later concluded, "Peace spread over Minneapolis like a cheap veneer, thinly masking both workers' dissatisfaction and suspicion, and employers' determination never to bargain with the union."¹⁰²

Years later, Ray Dunne recalled how Cannon situated the struggle in Minneapolis within the dramatic nationwide upsurge of class struggle and the possibilities this presented to expand the influence, resources, and reach of the Communist League of America. To Dunne this was "almost completely new and strange." What clearly impressed Dunne was Cannon's capacity to draw certain lessons from his past experiences that could then be assimilated to the partic-

101 The above paragraphs draw on Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 92–94; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 134–135, 150–151; Harry DeBoer in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 90–92.

102 Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 93–94. It is difficult to pin down precisely when Cannon arrived in Minneapolis, and while Dunne and Childs, *Permanent Counter-Revolution*, is factually inaccurate and sectarian in its presentation, there is a believable assertion that Cannon was in meetings with Vincent Ray Dunne and Carl Skoglund as Grant Dunne and Bill Brown addressed the Friday ratification meeting (20). Korth's statement is in *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 104–105.

ularities of specific, and distinctly new, situations. Cannon, for instance, had a profound aversion to state-orchestrated labor-boards, arbitration panels, and mediation exercises. He abhorred the professional machinery of class conciliation. Referring to the slick emissaries of Roosevelt's New Deal labor conciliators, Cannon later noted with contempt how they descended on strike-torn Minneapolis: "They came ... all greased up for another standard performance." Cannon also seemed particularly adept at reinforcing his comrades' inclinations not to capitulate to AFL officials like Cliff Hall, and Local 574 Executive Board members influenced by him, all of whom would have willingly ceded to Governor Olson "a free hand" in the negotiations.¹⁰³

It was Cannon's approach to Olson that was most noteworthy. "Floyd Olson was undoubtedly the leader of the official labor movement in Minnesota," Cannon later wrote, "but we did not recognize his leadership." Cannon's adroitness lay in his understanding that Olson could be pressured, albeit only so far, to exercise his influence positively for the General Drivers' Union. If backed into a corner, however, Cannon understood that Olson would do whatever it took to reign in a threatening labor revolt, including mobilizing the National Guard in a "naked strikebreaking action." It was one thing to best the Minneapolis police and the despised "deputies" in open street battle, but a different matter altogether to confront armed state Guardsmen. Minneapolis militants speculated that the ties of these Guardsmen to strikers and local supporters would be weaker than those of local police, and their capacity to exercise restraint with their weapons considerably less than those of the home-grown cops.

Knowing full well that the strike was organized to secure the diverse workforce associated with the Minneapolis trucking industry the protections of trade unionism, it would have been adventurist (and defeatist) folly to lead militant workers into a pseudo-revolutionary confrontation with the state. Cannon thus served as a voice of realism in the strike settlement negotiations.

103 Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 93; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 157. As part of the resolution of the May conflict, Dobbs and the CLA Minneapolis leadership agreed to arbitration procedures that Olson and the employers promoted, and that Cannon would, had he been involved in the settlement discussions, almost certainly have protested. Maloney later commented that Local 574 "was opposed to arbitration," except on a one-time basis, relating to wage issues, when the limited concession of arbitration could be used to secure agreement. This seems to have been a position that emerged out of Cannon's post-May 1934 involvement in Local 574's affairs, for it does not apply to the resolution of the second teamster strike. See Maloney interview with Duffy and Miller, 4 June 1979, Transcript, 2-14, Box 2, File: "Minneapolis Teamsters Strike 1934," and Maloney, "Informal Note," appended to clipping Mordecai Spektor, "Militant Minneapolis: Strike Remembered," *Guardian*, 8 August 1984, Box 4, File: "Miscellaneous Notes and Clippings," Maloney Papers, MNHS.

He understood that, “Every strike is a compromise in the sense that it leaves the bosses in control of industry and free to exploit the workers. The best settlement only limits and checks this exploitation to a certain extent. Realistic leaders do not expect justice from the capitalists, they only strive to extract as much as possible for the union in the given situation and strengthen their forces for another fight.” Cannon appreciated that “revolutionary workers have been distinguished by a singular one-sidedness in regard to strike and trade union strategy.” Having led and organized many a militant strike, revolutionary-minded American leftists had nonetheless “seldom succeeded in maintaining a stable union.” How and when to settle strikes so as to keep alive the momentum of industrial unionism in a clearly non-revolutionary situation was thus entirely new territory for “modern militants.” Cannon utilized his experience in the United States class struggle as well as his understanding of the protracted nature of revolutionary organization that he was learning in the school of Trotskyism to place his own stamp on the uprising of the Minneapolis truckers.

An editorial in *The Militant* listed four gains won by truckers in Minneapolis in May 1934: defeat of the capitalist open-shop offensive; union recognition; proven leadership; and appreciation among the ranks of the coercive role of the capitalist state, even when it constituted a “farmer-labor” coalition. For revolutionaries, the editorial made clear, the issue was not “Revolution” as rhetorical bombast and adventurist misleadership, but the patient preparation of working-class advance and class consciousness that might secure some distant revolutionary possibility. Changing the actual balance of forces to the advantage of the working class was paramount. This required painstaking planning and careful attention to the detail of how to wage strikes successfully in a rabidly hostile climate. This organizational competence also needed to be supplemented with the capacity to judge when conditions were right to advance or retreat, and to act decisively when the moment of possible resolution arrived:

In Minneapolis we had a strike and a leadership which, when viewing it as a whole, its militancy, its thoroughness of organization, its loyalty to the class and effective policy is unequalled in recent labor history. For the first time in this present period the entirely correct method of mobilizing every member and every worker involved in a solid phalanx resulted in preventing a single wheel from moving and in routing not only the scabs but also the police and special deputies [T]he Minneapolis struggle came as a turning point, cutting a deep wedge into the capitalist offensive and into the attempt to crush the strike movement by force. ... At this

moment the essential issue is working class organization – trade union organization – as preparation for the much greater class battles to come. The real test of the revolutionists lies today in their ability to establish such organizations and to weld them firmly into a movement against the class enemy. ... [T]he strike ... gained the central objective – union recognition. It is one of the first of the new unions to gain actual recognition. ... The Minneapolis strike was not a revolution. It fell short of being a revolution. ... [I]t is ... strikes such as the one in Minneapolis that begin to prepare the basis for the upsurge which is still to come. It is the organizations of the kind ... built in Minneapolis which hold promise of far greater working-class victories. In that strike, and due to its able leadership, the workers involved received a valuable lesson and gained a real understanding not only of what the role of the capitalist state is – and more specifically the capitalist state with a farmer-labor governor – but they also received a lesson and an understanding in the first fundamentals of how to begin to cope with that state.

The Trotskyists of Local 574 achieved all of this with such “a rapid sweep” that the General Drivers’ Union “counts today some 7,000 members and is gaining new recruits daily.” Cannon considered that the settlement in May 1934 was an historic advance, not only for the insurgent truckers and the American working class, but for the Communist League of America.

Yet, Cannon also placed a much-needed accent on not representing the outcome as an absolute victory. This was a tendency with a long history among conservative business union officialdom. It was also not unheard of for Communist Party trade union figures to exaggerate the advances registered in particular struggles. Such an orientation usually backfired, however, because it failed to acknowledge concessions made and gains not decisively secured. The 25 May 1934 ratification meeting, convened and addressed by the strike’s Left Opposition leaders, among others, contrasted sharply with “the snake-oil seller’s pitch with which the AFL officials had presented the coal settlement the previous February.” The strikers in May were given the straight goods: the settlement was presented frankly as “a compromise with the bosses,” and what it did and did not accomplish was “forthrightly and fully discussed.”

Cannon was adamant that “the indubitable establishment of a new union where none existed before” was, in spite of concessions made and ambiguities that unfortunately continued, a considerable achievement, one that reverberated throughout the country. “The labor movement of Minneapolis has been restored to new life by the emergence of Local 574,” he declared. “The working class of the entire country has been inspired by a new example and enriched by

a fresh experience which constitutes a real contribution to the burning question of trade unionism." The sage but quiet advocates of proletarian revolution who had been denigrated even within the Communist League of America during the height of dog days factionalism as little more than "Cannon's hand-raisers" were now "universally recognized as among the most important Trotskyist militants in America." As Sam Gordon later wrote: "They had helped make Minneapolis a union town. They had forged a cadre that was to prove impregnable in the struggles to come. Their fame reached out to wherever there were Trotskyists in the world." Cannon, in 1934, was less effusive, if unambiguously laudatory: "Honest and loyal workers everywhere will acknowledge an indebtedness to the group of Minneapolis militants at the head of Local 574 who organized this magnificent movement, steered it through the strike and the settlement, and still remain at its head. The work they have done already is bound to influence future developments of the left-wing labor movement on a national scale. And they are not finished yet."¹⁰⁴

12 Stalinist Slurs

The Communist Party, which played no role in leading the strike and had very few members among the thousands of strikers, denounced the struggle and the Trotskyists at its head. Even before the union voted to walk out, a Stalinist leaflet circulated among the truckers, labeling Mick Dunne and Carl Skoglund as "agents of the bosses" and "traitors." Ignoring the existence of the Strike Committee of 75 that directed the May actions, the Communist Party called for "rank-and-file leadership" to counter the "undemocratic" actions of Local 574's leaders. Two days before the Battle of Deputies Run, the Communist Party, along with the Unemployed Council and the International Labor Defense (bodies that the CP controlled), demanded that a local Stalinist leader, Sam K. Davis, address a mass meeting at strike headquarters. Davis came prepared with the usual leaflets of derision, and as he berated those at the head of the General Drivers' Union, strikers ripped up the carping circulars in anger. Workers were

¹⁰⁴ The above paragraphs draw on Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 232–233; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 90–98; "The Minneapolis Strike: Editorial Note," *The Militant*, 9 June 1934; Clem Forsen, "Tactics at Minneapolis," *The Militant*, 30 June 1934; C.H., "Strike Sidelights," *The Militant*, 30 June 1934; James P. Cannon, "Minneapolis Strike – An Answer to its Defamers," *The Militant*, 16 June 1934; H., "Strike Sidelights," *The Militant*, 30 June 1934; Al Dasch, "Strikes and the National Guard," *The Militant*, 30 June 1934; Sam Gordon in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 64; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 151–162.

infuriated at this divisive performance and the Dunne brothers, Skoglund, and Dobbs personally intervened to prevent irate rank-and-file militants from physically attacking Davis.

Once the strike settlement was ratified, the Communist Party redoubled its attack. The *Daily Worker* pronounced that the militant struggle had been defeated and blamed the derailment of the worker insurgency on the Trotskyists who guided the union. National CP leader, Earl Browder, came to Minneapolis in June 1934. He addressed a crowd of 750 on the General Strike wave, painting a glowing picture of events unfolding in San Francisco, in which the Communist Party played a decisive role. Browder contrasted San Francisco's successes with the supposed failures of the Toledo Auto-Lite battle and the local teamster conflict. Browder was particularly hard on the Dunes, who came in for the usual Stalinist drubbing. "Is their settlement any better than that made by the Social-Fascists everywhere else?" Browder asked. The audience, clearly tiring of the tirade, reacted with indifference. In claiming that the teamster settlement contained "an endorsement of the Company Union," Browder apparently went too far. According to a report in *The Militant*, this was all too raw for even "the hard-boiled Stalinists" in the working-class crowd "to swallow." The audience lapsed into a stony silence.

Cannon took especial aim at Stalinist misrepresentation of the May accord, noting caustically that it was the success of the Minneapolis teamster uprising, and its patient and efficient leadership, that necessitated a Communist Party assault on what had been accomplished. "Here's a strike that wasn't wrecked, here's a new union that is still alive and going strong after the strike," Cannon bellowed. For "the Stalinist quack doctors of trade unionism," so acclimatized to "their patients always" dying, "Something must be wrong!" As Cannon insisted, the Communist Party, "specialists in the art of losing strikes and breaking up unions" were "bitterly disappointed with the Minneapolis situation." It was not surprising that the Stalinists would "work overtime to discredit the strike and the union and blacken the names of the organizers and leaders."

Cannon found it especially nauseating that the dirtiest job of "slandering the Minneapolis movement and all connected with it" was assigned to his old friend and brother of the strike leaders, William F. Dunne. Dunne's denunciation, at first voiced in speeches and articles in the *Daily Worker*, would later be published in a pamphlet co-authored by Morris Childs that appeared under the title *Permanent Counter-Revolution: The Role of the Trotskyites in the Minneapolis Strikes*. Insisting that the militant workers "had just begun to fight," Dunne argued that the Trotskyist leadership of Local 574 suppressed "the mass sentiment for a general strike," turning a victory into defeat. "The exposure and defeat of Olson should have been the central political

objective of the Minneapolis struggle,” according to Dunne, and driving the Farmer-Laborite from office was “the basic necessity for winning the economic demands for the Divers’ Union and the rest of the working class.” Instead, Cannon and the Dunne brothers, who were written off by their elder sibling as mere “comedians” of the class struggle (also as “palookas,” “traitors,” and “fools or crooks, or both”), engineered a shameful capitulation. It left Olson firmly entrenched in the Governor’s mansion, the Central Labor Council demagogues “never put to the test of actually mobilizing strike action in support of the auto drivers,” illusions in Roosevelt’s NRA strengthened, employers breathing easy, and the teamsters and unemployed “who bore the cruel brunt of the struggle” the losers. “[T]he workers were cold-decked by James P. Cannon, his lieutenants in the leadership of the union, and Governor Olson and his Farmer-Labor Party henchmen in control of the Minneapolis Trades and Labor Assembly,” Dunne claimed, assailing the “incurable opportunism” of “the Trotzkyite position” and “its priests and altar boys.” When Olson cocked the trigger of the National Guard, Cannon and the Dunes retreated in cowardice. This sorry record of appeasement, according to Bill Dunne, constituted “another miserable page in the history of class collaboration in the labor movement. ... With one gesture the Trotzkyite leaders nullified the days and nights of heroic struggle by thousands of workers.” Dunne concluded that the May strike and settlement of General Drivers’ Union Local 574 was “one of the most serious recent setbacks suffered by the working class [,] ... a needless retreat engineered by spineless and unprincipled leaders.” The Cannon-Dunne leadership, in Bill Dunne’s representation, was responsible for a venal surrender.¹⁰⁵

105 The above paragraphs rely on and quote from Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 98–99; Walker, *American City*, 127; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 96–97; “Minneapolis Shows the Way,” *The Militant*, 26 May 1934; “The Minneapolis Strike: Editorial Note,” *The Militant*, 9 June 1934; C. Forsen, “Browder ‘Exposes’ Strike ‘Sell-Out’ in Minneapolis,” *The Militant*, 16 June 1934; James P. Cannon, “Minneapolis Strike – An Answer to its Defamers,” *The Militant*, 16 June 1934; C. Forsen, “Role of the Stalinists in the Minneapolis Strike,” *The Militant*, 23 June 1934; Dunne and Childs, *Permanent Counter-Revolution*; Kramer, “The Dunne Boys of Minneapolis,” 394. The Dunne pamphlet was forcefully responded to in Harry Strang [Herbert Solow], “Stalinist Hokum on Minneapolis,” *The Militant*, 10 November 1934. For Charles Rumford Walker’s illuminating collection of Communist Party leaflets and flyers distributed during the teamster insurgency, calling on workers to resist the employers and the state, and implicitly or explicitly critical of the strike/union leadership, see File: “Communist Party, Minnesota Flyers and Bulletins, 1934–1936,” Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS. Walker also drew up a five-page typescript (without page numbers) in which quotes from the *Daily Worker* chronicle the Communist Party’s attack on the Trotskyist leaders of Local 574 in July and August 1934. See File: “American City Incom-

Cannon offered a sobering rejoinder. He pilloried Dunne's Third Period call for a General Strike-induced revolutionary confrontation in Minneapolis that would have unseated Olson as state governor. At issue was the *limited* power and consciousness of the Minneapolis truckers and their need, first and foremost, to secure basic union recognitions, and experience, through struggle, the ways in which a figure like Olson would be revealed, not as a friend and ally of the working class, but as someone committed to maintaining the subordination of labor to capital. Against Dunne's insistence that Governor Olson was the "main enemy," and that a General Strike should have been proclaimed and any strike settlement rejected until "the state troops were demobilized," the CLA leader stressed a more transitional understanding of class struggle. The Stalinist call for a General Strike in May 1934 was premature. Its implementation, in Dunne's words, would necessarily have taken place "over the heads of the Central Labor Council and the State Federation of Labor." More pointedly, in Cannon's view, it would have also been called "over the heads of the workers also, including the truck drivers." As Cannon wrote:

plete Notes and Articles," Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS. As late as 2009, the Communist Party, through its aged spokesman, Gus Hall, was still claiming that it alone rescued the Minneapolis teamsters' strikes from the jaws of a "Trotskyite" defeat. Hall claimed that the Communist Party assigned him to "give leadership to the strike," and that he and others developed the "confrontation tactics" that ensured a victory for the truckers and turned back the Trotskyist penchant for "playing footsie with the governor of the state of Minnesota who was out to break the strike with the use of the National Guard." See Gus Hall Action Club, "Red Heroes of the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters Strike: Gus Hall and the CPUSA," available at <http://gushallactionclub.blogspot.ca/2009/05/red-heroes-of-1934-minneapolis.html>. This Stalinist political fantasy contains not one shred of substantiation, resting on assertions that cite no evidence. A convincing repudiation of Hall's claim to have been involved in the Minneapolis strikes, with discussion about the one identifiable Local 574 member affiliated with the Communist Party and his lack of any leadership role is Maloney's interview with David Riehle, 1 October 1988, Transcript, esp. 1–32, Box 1, File: "Maloney, Shaun, Oral History Transcript, Tape 1," Riehle Papers, MNHS. Morris Childs, Dunne's co-author of *Permanent Counter-Revolution*, was a long-time CP functionary and editor of the *Daily Worker*. A graduate of the Lenin School (1929–30), he was recruited by the Soviet secret police to spy on his revolutionary classmates. Later he served as a courier for the Soviets. He broke with the Party in 1948, was subsequently contacted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and was prevailed upon to rejoin the CP in order to provide inside information. As arguably United States Communism's most infamous double agent, Childs was feted by both antagonists in the Cold War, receiving the Order of the Red Banner in 1975 and the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1987. He is the subject of a conservative account, John Barron, *Operation SOLO: The FBI's Man in the Kremlin* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1996).

The workers of Minneapolis, like the striking workers all over the country, understood the 'central objective' to be the *recognition of the union*. The leaders were in full harmony with them on this question, and they stuck to this objective and, when it was obtained, they did not attempt to parade the workers through a general strike, for the sake of exercise or for "the defeat of Governor Olson." For one reason, it was not the right thing to do. And, for another reason, they couldn't have done it if they had tried.

Cannon thus concluded that the critique of Bill Dunne and the Communist Party of the Minneapolis events of May 1934 erred in construing "the situation as revolutionary, and aimed at insurrection." In the United States in 1934, this was a farcical reading of the political realities. Cannon suggested that his old friend Dunne, whom he bitingly dismissed as "more at home with proverbs than with politics," needed to remember that "every vegetable has its season."¹⁰⁶

In researching his study of the rank-and-file history of Minneapolis, *American City*, Charles Rumford Walker lent credence to Cannon's judgements. While Walker observed that the truckers he interviewed seemed to be growing more militant as a consequence of their involvement in strikes in 1934 and their contact with revolutionaries in the CLA, they were hardly committed to an all-out struggle to depose the social class that owned and controlled the essential elements of the economy. Bringing down a government was simply not listed on the agenda of the Minneapolis working class in 1934. Walker captured the unevenness of class consciousness with his description of a mythical, average truck driver. This archetypal union militant was especially agitated that National Guardsmen would be used to "break the drivers' strike," recognizing how the power of the state was routinely used to keep labor down. On this basic principle, Walker's composite truck driver talked "like a Communist." Yet this very same worker "still votes for Olson," who called in the National Guard, and "denies being a Communist, and has even beaten up a few in his day." Cannon and his Minneapolis Trotskyist comrades appreciated, in ways that Bill Dunne and the Communist Party clearly did not, that workers in the Minneapolis trucking sector needed to secure limited victories on the trade union front and gain much-needed experience in the class struggle before embarking on a full-scale assault on state power through a political General Strike.¹⁰⁷

106 James P. Cannon, "Minneapolis and its Meaning," *The New Internationalist*, 1 (July 1934), 3–5.

107 Walker, "Notes for Life Story of a Truck Driver," 1–4, Box 1, File: "American City: Preliminary Prospectus and General Notes," CRW Papers, MNHS.

The Stalinist response to the May 1934 strike and its settlement thus refused to address the extent to which former comrades in the Communist League of America were following a nuanced class struggle course. Shrill and ineffective, the Communist Party critique was a typical Third Period concoction of sectarianism and adventurism that more often than not registered with militant strikers as a divisive, even incomprehensible, harangue. It often seemed the mirror image of the attacks on the strike leadership from the mainstream Minneapolis newspaper dailies, Dan Tobin's national headquarters of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the Citizens' Alliance, and the truck operatives Employers' Advisory Committee [EAC]. When strikers read Communist denigrations of leaders they had seen tested in difficult circumstances and regarded as selfless builders of Local 574, they reacted with forceful repudiation, snorting dismissively that such critics must be "in the pay of the bosses." They placed no credence in wild accusations and personal attacks, which seemed "too far from the truth." It was just this kind of distortion and disingenuous misrepresentation of Minneapolis strikes and their settlements that prompted the leading non-Trotskyist Local 574 figure, President Bill Brown, to read one leaflet and snort, "The Stalinists have not only discredited Communism out here; they've discredited the mimeograph machine."¹⁰⁸

For all of their recognition that the Communist Party's attack on the strike leadership was little more than self-serving sectarianism, American Trotskyists never wavered in their principled, albeit critical, defense of Stalinist adversaries. The ideologues at the helm of the Citizens' Alliance, not to mention conservative newspapers and other conventional opinion-makers, were relentlessly anti-communist, to the point that they lacked any discrimination with respect to the obviously differentiated sections of the Minneapolis left. A "Red" was simply a "Red." Everyone from Olson in the Governor's office, to the Dunne brothers on strike podiums, to the Communist Party and its marginalized sectarians, were tarred with the same anti-communist brush. When the Stalinist bookstore was broken into in the mid-1930s, the premises ransacked, pamphlets torn up, books stolen, and petty cash pilfered, the perpetrators left a sign in the window proclaiming, "modern/BOSTON TEA PARTY/ NO REDS/Wanted in Minneapolis." It would have been easy for Local 574's leadership to let this act of vigilantism go unnoticed in their circles, but the Trotskyists responded

108 Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 98–99; Tselos, "The Labor Movement in Minneapolis in the 1930s," 234–235; F.K., "Minneapolis Shows the Way," *The Militant*, 26 May 1934; C. Forsen, "The Role of the Stalinists in the Minneapolis Strike," *The Militant*, 23 June 1934; "Minneapolis Notes: The Rank and File Opposition," *The Militant*, 23 June 1934; Herbert Solow, "War in Minneapolis," *Nation*, 8 August 1934, 160.

with integrity, calling on all who valued the right to dissent to stop ugly attacks of this kind. "There are many workers in Minneapolis who are out of sympathy with the CP," noted one statement,

But it would be short-sighted policy to abstain for this reason from registering a vigorous protest. ... To-day they will strike the Communists, tomorrow it will be the Socialists, the next day the trade union halls If the police will not stop the plundering of the workers by lawless vultures, the workers will STOP THE VIGILANTES!

In the years to come, the Trotskyists guiding the radical wing of Minneapolis labor would establish a Union Defense Guard to protect basic freedoms of association and speech from threats and dangerous incursions coming from right-wing and even fascist quarters.¹⁰⁹

13 Farmer-Labor Two Class Hybrid vs. Class Struggle Perspective

Stalinist slurs against the Trotskyist leadership of Local 574 were of course wildly off base, but there were small kernels of truth in some allegations of political miscues. The Minneapolis Trotskyists could have taken stronger stands and disagreed more publicly and transparently with Olson, especially with respect to his duplicitous role in the obvious ambiguities inherent in the May strike settlement. Dobbs and others seemed to rely, at times rather naively, on Olson's assurances. The account of all of this in Dobbs's rightly well-regarded 1972 book, *Teamster Rebellion*, is undoubtedly colored by hindsight and understates the extent to which Dobbs seemed somewhat taken in by the duplicitous Farmer-Labor Governor, particularly around the issues of arbitration and the understanding of what constituted, for collective bargaining purposes, an "inside worker."

The tendency on Dobbs's part to cede to Olson more credibility than he deserved may well have been connected to the American Trotskyists' indecisive stand on the labor party in the early 1930s. As discussed earlier in this book, Shachtman promoted the view that, based on Workers (Communist) Party opportunist flirtations with the LaFollette movement in the 1920s, vir-

¹⁰⁹ See "Brief Miscellaneous Notes," in File, "Notes Local 574 and Strike," Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS, the document seemingly relying on material drawn from 1934 issues of *The Organizer*.

tually any call for a labor party in the United States was destined to result in a reformist formation. This mechanical rejection of the labor party, posed amidst the factionalism leading up to 1934, limited the American Left Opposition, hobbling it at a time when working-class mobilizations suggested the possibility of new political breakthroughs. At precisely the point that it needed to be able to assert decisively that Olson's cross-class Farmer-Labor Party was not, in fact, a labor party, but rather a third-party adjunct of the Roosevelt Democrats, the CLA was handcuffed in its political critique. It could not bring itself to negotiate a creative path between the Scylla of opportunistic accommodation to the Farmer-Labor Party and the Charybdis of an altogether too wooden and sectarian rejection of the very possibility of workers in the United States sustaining a genuine labor party. As such, the Left Opposition was constrained in its capacity to pose any political alternative to the Olson-led, cross-class Farmer-Labor Party, even abstractly.

This lessened the Trotskyist critique of Minnesota Farmer-Laborism to the limiting perspective that Olson, who proclaimed his neutrality in the class struggle, was inevitably a helpmate of the bosses. It avoided declaring unequivocally that Olson was indeed a capitalist politician, albeit a "progressive" and "reformist" one, and Farmer-Laborism a capitalist political orientation. It left the small and isolated Communist League of America as the only available alternative to the established "alliance of trade unions and farmers' organizations" leavened by urban middle-class support that Olson headed in 1934. This may have conditioned Dobbs and others, ironically, to invest in Olson more authority and trust than was warranted. Bill Brown's instinctual Farmer-Laborite radicalism, shared by many of the more class conscious rank-and-file members of Local 574, would have reinforced this tendency. Pitted against Olson, as Cannon always appreciated, the Minneapolis Trotskyists occasionally leaned in the direction of giving the sitting governor too much of the benefit of the doubt, even as it was apparent, in one militant's later words, that Olson's attacks "were always on the union first and the Citizen's Alliance last." All of this pressured the class struggle context of 1934 in directions curtailing the *political* gains that the CLA was able to consolidate out of the teamsters' rebellion, just as it led Dobbs and others into some bargaining cul-de-sacs premised on undue faith in Olson's authority.¹¹⁰

110 Note especially the post-strike evidence from hearings before the Regional Labor Board, quoted in Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 103, where Dobbs, challenged by trucking company officials over the issue of who was included in understandings of "inside workers," replied, as against the bosses' interpretation of the settlement, that "The Governor assured us [Section 8] would be interpreted to give us jurisdiction over these

Yet, on balance, the Trotskyist leadership of the teamsters, in spite of wavering over the need to counter-pose the possibility of a labor party alternative to Olson's governing Farmer-Labor formation, acted astutely in pressing a successful organizing drive in 1934.¹¹¹ The Dunne brothers, Skoglund, and their CLA comrades came to understand exactly where Olson stood as a radical petty-bourgeois element, reliant on working-class support but committed to maintaining capitalist law and order. They steered a class war course through the minefield of federal mediators, recalcitrant and reactionary bosses organized in the Citizens' Alliance, and a progressive Governor whose charges included bayonet-wielding National Guardsmen. Cannon played no small part in developing a revolutionary perspective on all of this. He recognized, perhaps more clearly than anyone in the leadership of Local 574, that "the government, its agencies and its institutions" were brought "into the center of every situation" in the class conflicts of the 1930s. He subsequently spelled this out in *The History of American Trotskyism*:

All modern strikes require political direction. ... A strike leader without some conception of a political line was very much out of date already by 1934. The old fashioned trade union movement, which used to deal with the bosses without governmental interference, belongs in the museum. The modern labor movement must be politically directed because it is

people. ... He said it would be the legal and logical interpretation ... We considered the Governor had a good legal mind and accepted his advice." Contrast this with the account in Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 96–97, 102, which also has indications of Dobbs' understanding of the amorphous class content of Farmer Laborism, as on 44, 178. Also note "Strikers Defy Olson Militia: Local 574 Call for a Protest General Strike," and "Protest the Military Terror in Minneapolis," *The Militant*, 4 August 1934. On Olson as a neutralist helpmate of the bosses see Hugo Oehler, "A Demagogue at Work: Olson's Role in the Strike," *The Militant*, 11 August 1934, with the quote on Olson attacking the union first from Maloney: Maloney interviewed by Duffy and Miller, 4 June 1979, Transcript, 2–14, File: "Minneapolis Teamsters Strike," and "Informal Note," appended to clipping, Mordecai Specktor, "Militant Minneapolis: Strike Remembered," *Guardian*, 8 August 1984, Boxes 2 and 4, Maloney Papers, MNHS. For more on the issue of LaFollette, Farmer-Laborism, the Labor Party, and CLA factionalism in the dog days see my earlier discussion in Chapters 2 and 3 above and *Dog Days*, esp. 37–40, 253–255. There is a quite useful discussion of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and Trotskyism in N. Dylan Boorman, "American Trotskyism and the Farmer-Labor Party from Origins to 1936," MA thesis, San Francisco State, 2017, which is discussed more fully in chapters below.

111 Trotsky's later 1938 statement, in which he situated the drafting of the transitional program within an understanding of prior political activity, is thus relevant: "One can say that we didn't have a program until this day. Yet we acted." See Trotsky, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution*, 137.

confronted by the government at every turn. Our people were prepared for that since they were political people, inspired by political conceptions. The policy of the class struggle guided our comrades; they couldn't be deceived and outmaneuvered, as so many strike leaders of that period were, by this mechanism of sabotage and destruction known as the National Labor Board and all its auxiliary setups. They put no reliance whatever in Roosevelt's Labor Board; they weren't fooled by any idea that Roosevelt, the liberal 'friend of labor' President, was going to help the truck drivers of Minneapolis win a few cents more an hour. They weren't deluded by the fact that there was at the time in Minnesota a Farmer-Labor Governor, presumed to be on the side of the workers ... Consequently, they expected from the start that the union would have to fight for its right to exist; that the bosses would not yield any recognition to the union, would not yield any increase of wages or reduction of the scandalous hours without some pressure being brought to bear. Therefore they prepared everything from the point of view of the class war.

If Cannon's retrospective assessment perhaps understated some missteps in the May negotiations, it highlighted how Cannon's arrival in Minneapolis signaled a strengthened class stand. For the Trotskyist leadership of Local 574, the fundamental principle guiding their actions came to be that "power, not diplomacy, would decide the issue. ... In such things as the conflict of class interests one must be prepared to fight."¹¹² This had always, for the most part, animated the teamster insurgency, but in the aftermath of the May 1934 settlement this class struggle orientation stiffened.

Cannon departed Minneapolis for New York in early June 1934, stopping off in Chicago. There he gave two lectures on the teamsters' organizing drive and the strikers' battles against the Citizens' Alliance, speaking to 150 workers at the Communist League of America headquarters on Friday June 8 and 500 black and white workers two nights later at a Sunday forum in Washington Park. The club that sponsored the evening open-air talk, chaired by a Stalinist sympathizer, was enthusiastic to hear an account of Local 574's organizational accomplishments and voted unanimously to make Cannon a life-long member of the radical assembly. One week later, back in New York, Cannon addressed an Irving Plaza crowd of 500 workers on the Minneapolis events. He took pains to address frontally "the slanderous attacks of the Stalinists on the strike leaders

112 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 147–148.

as betrayers and the settlement as a sell-out,” prompting a number of questions from leftists aligned with “all groups and tendencies.” Minneapolis was apparently the talk of the New York left, as Cannon fielded an array of queries: “What was the role of the C.P.?” “Are the strike leaders known in Minneapolis as Communists?” “How can a Communist say that Governor Olson was undecided as to whether to use the National Guard or not?” “Why do you attack the Communist Party?” “Why do you propose to allow Local 574 to remain in the A.F. of L.?” Answering these and other questions, Cannon called on all revolutionaries to support the Communist League of America and to work to build a new communist party that would provide “the entire American working class the same militant and intelligent leadership that was given the truck drivers in Minneapolis.”¹¹³

14 Interlude

As an early June 1934 headline in *The Militant* announced boldly, “Strike Wave Sweeps Country,” articles detailed the General Strike looming in Toledo and the longshoremen’s tie-up of Pacific Coast ports. In Minneapolis trucks moved unimpeded. The strike ended officially on Saturday, 26 May 1934. Bill Dunne and the Communist Party continued to denounce the Trotskyists and to assail Olson as a strikebreaker. When a Stalinist “Rank and File Committee” leafleted a mass meeting of Local 574, attacking the union’s leadership, denouncing the recent strike’s conduct and its ostensibly botched settlement, two members of this committee, sporting General Drivers’ Union buttons but unable to produce union cards and proof of their membership in the Local, were escorted from the hall. Only Bill Brown’s pleas from the podium to allow the “oppositionists” safe passage from the meeting, reinforced by a union guard, secured their exit without serious injury. The *Minneapolis Journal* and the *Minneapolis Labor Review* both published editorials suggesting that Olson, rather than acting against the strikers, had in fact mobilized the National Guard “as a weapon to make unfair employers come to terms.” One more strike could bankrupt the city, as the bill for the May 1934 battles came in at a whopping \$1,900,000. Police Chief Johannes, who denounced the union’s militant stand as “a disgrace,” demanded a doubling of the police budget. Additional funding, he fumed, was needed to pay for 400 new officers, establish an academy to train the cops “just

113 “Chicago Hears Report on Minneapolis Strike,” *The Militant*, 16 June 1934; “Cannon Lecture on the Minneapolis Strike,” *The Militant*, 23 June 1934.

like an army to handle riots,” and purchase motorcycles, machine guns, rifles with bayonets, and steel helmets.¹¹⁴

In its *post-mortem* on the strike, the Citizens' Alliance acknowledged that it was “caught napping in May,” and regrouped. It immediately raised a \$50,000 war chest, digging in its heels for a future fight. During June and July 1934, the employers' group unleashed a public relations blitz: radio airwaves were clogged with denunciations of Local 574's militant leadership; paid advertisements on anti-union themes covered a total of 30 newspaper pages; and columnists in the papers running the ads obligingly penned more than 250 articles with the same message. One headline in the *Minneapolis Tribune* screamed: “MUST MINNEAPOLIS BE PARALYZED BY A STRIKE TO SATISFY A HANDFUL OF COMMUNIST AGITATORS WHO DREAM OF MAKING MINNEAPOLIS THE BIRTHPLACE OF A NEW SOVIET REPUBLIC?” Such hyperbole drew on International Brotherhood of Teamsters' leader Dan Tobin, who claimed that “Communists and radicals” were behind the truckers' insurgency in Minneapolis, and responsible workers in the industry should “beware of these wolves in sheep's clothing.” Firms publicly proclaimed that drivers in their pay were satisfied with working conditions and wages and needed to rise up and repudiate their misleaders.¹¹⁵

It did not take long for the obvious problems in the May settlement to surface. Within a few weeks, Local 574 claimed 700 cases of discrimination against union members. “[T]he Gordian knot of the inside workers had not been cut by the ambiguous section written into the agreement,” wrote Charles Rumford Walker. Employers were only prepared to concede union representation to a fraction of the General Drivers' Union membership and claimed that, based on a highly dubious telephone survey, only 309 teamsters actually struck in May 1934. Insisting that their employees were, on the whole, content with their lot, voicing no desire to be affiliated with the General Drivers' Union, the trucking bosses further stipulated that to be included in the union each individual

114 “Strike Wave Sweeps Country,” *The Militant*, 2 June 1934; C. Forsen, “Role of the Stalinists in Minneapolis Strike,” *The Militant*, 23 June 1934; “The Rank and File Opposition,” *The Militant*, 30 June 1934; S [Max Shachtman], “The Record of Bill Dunne: The Man on the Flying Trapeze,” *The Militant*, 7 July 1934; 14 July 1934; “The Governor's Candid Friend,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 2 June 1934; “And Now He ‘Repels Invasion,’” *Minneapolis Journal*, 4 June 1934; “What Other People Think,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 5 June 1934; Walker, *American City*, 158.

115 Walker, *American City*, 155–157; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 239–240; Tselos, “The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s,” 234–235; Ann Ross, “Labor Unity in Minneapolis,” *The New Republic*, 25 July 1934, 283; “Daniel Tobin Goes to Bat for the Bosses,” *The Militant*, 14 July 1934; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 153–154.

worker must specifically request representation from Local 574. It was not long before employers' spokesmen broke off relations with the union, claiming it constituted little more than "a handful of alien agitators."

Under pressure from the Regional Labor Board to clarify what his ambiguously-written clause on union representation actually meant, Olson backtracked. The Governor proposed restricting membership in Local 574 to drivers and helpers, receiving and shipping clerks, stevedores, and freight-elevator operators. When this suggestion pleased no one, Olson withdrew from the fray, urging that all disputes between the union and the employers be submitted to the Regional Labor Board for arbitration.

This resulted in "inside workers" effectively being denied representation. As discussions at the Labor Board spiraled downward, it was apparent that this body had no authority to enforce compliance with its rulings, even if it proved able to reach decisions, which it often could not. When a federal Commissioner of Conciliation, Eugene H. Dunnigan, was parachuted into Minneapolis in the first week of July 1934 to review the Board's handling of arbitration, he found the parties hopelessly deadlocked. The eleven-person panel was split between five union and five employer representatives, with the neutral Chair of the body refusing to cast his tie-breaking vote. The sticking point was always the issue of "inside workers" and the union's right to represent them. In routinely avoiding granting this pivotal sector the rights of membership in the General Drivers' Union, the Regional Labor Board was dismissed sarcastically by the militant union: "The Labor Board has 'generously' ruled that Local 574 shall have the right to represent almost half of its membership."¹¹⁶

Dan Tobin and the International, never wanting Local 574 to organize all of those involved in the trucking industry, pounced on the dissident Minneapolis branch. The local received no strike support from the IBT and was forced to bear the expense of the February and May strikes. Tobin and Teamster headquarters demanded immediate payment of the initiation-fee tax of \$1.00 per member. This would have been a crippling financial blow to a local that had taken in thousands of new members, particularly with the near certainty of yet another strike on the horizon. Local 574 had no option but to withhold the \$1.00 tax,

¹¹⁶ The above paragraphs draw on Citizens' Alliance, "The So-Called Truck Drivers' Strike," *Special Weekly Bulletin*, 3 August 1934, in File: "Miscellaneous Papers, 1934, 1936," Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS; Walker, *American City*, 155; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 135–139; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 102–103; Thomas E. Blantz, C.S.C., *A Priest in Public Service: Francis J. Haas and the New Deal* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 111–113; Blantz, "Father Haas and the Minneapolis Truckers' Strike of 1934," *Minnesota History*, 42 (Spring 1970), 8–9; Solow, "War in Minneapolis," *The Nation* (8 August 1934), 160–161.

leaving it vulnerable to sanctions, and eventually expulsion, from the American Federation of Labor union.¹¹⁷

Local 574 was not to be deterred. It widened networks of support and agitation. It quietly rallied a contingent of 5,000 jobless to its cause, enrolling them in a section of the union. Planning was started for a conference on the unemployment problem, to be held later in the summer. A new union headquarters was opened at 225 South Third Street, where Friday evening classes on Trade Union History and Strike Strategy were initiated. The Ladies' Auxiliary, which played a valuable role in the May strike, broadened its activities, and began holding regular meetings to discuss how more women could be mobilized for the fight. Many families suffered the loss of a male breadwinner paycheck during the job actions. Some pickets had been injured in the violent street battles, while others landed in jail or were sentenced to workhouse terms. The Auxiliary undertook to aid these class war victims, or to secure them some measure of public relief.

As the Citizens' Alliance ramped up its campaign to victimize union militants in June 1934, more and more families turned to Local 574 for help. Women's Auxiliary members organized tag days to raise money, and approached Minneapolis trade unions for contributions to help ease the burdens of those hardest hit. Members of the Auxiliary also organized a benefit dance to launch Local 574's new building, featuring three union bands, kegs of beer donated by unionized breweries, and bartenders affiliated with the labor movement. This netted the General Drivers' coffers \$700.

On 25 June 1934, Local 574 launched *The Organizer*, a weekly tabloid of four pages with a press run of 5,000. It aimed "to weld a solid band of understanding between ... members, to carry a message of hope to all non-union men, and to hold a beacon light of progress before all organized labor." Mrs. Yeager, a Women's Auxiliary activist, was put in charge of the publication's distribution, and *The Organizer* was soon for sale "in every tavern in town that had working class customers." Consciously started to "refute the lies of the boss press, give the true facts about [the union's] aims and policies, and expose the anti-labor schemes of the bosses and the government," the creation of the newspaper marked a significant step forward in the Minneapolis truck drivers' struggle. The working-class paper drew the immediate ire of the Citizens' Alliance, which threatened to prosecute those responsible for *The Organizer* with "criminal syndicalism" charges. Pressure was put on local print shops to refuse

117 Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 103; Miles B. Dunne, "Story of 544," *Northwest Organizer*, 27 February 1941.

to print the new paper, and Citizens' Alliance-allied opponents of the strike tried to hijack an edition of the bulletin as it was being distributed. The union driver and his helpers "cleaned house on the finks." Eventually these attempts to suppress *The Organizer* ceased. One of *The Organizer's* early scoops was the announcement that it had a list of names, addresses, and hours logged by the "special deputies" during the May strike, including the "amount of cheese due each rat." It asked its readers for advice on whether or not to publish the names of these "Slimy creatures."

Aware that there had been problems ascertaining what farmers were trucking into Minneapolis during the May strike, the General Drivers' Union secured an arrangement with the militant Farmers' Holiday Association, the National Farm Bureau, and the Market Gardeners' Association. Farm trucks would be allowed into Minneapolis in the event of a work stoppage, but only if they displayed permits from Local 574 and the farm organization to which they belonged. Farmers' committees were set up to picket the roads leading into Minneapolis, and the union leased a large parking lot a few blocks away from the Market District so that gardeners and farmers could conduct business in rent-free stalls with small grocers, who were allowed to take produce from the area in cars but not trucks. The close connections established between farmers and workers widened understandings and practices of collectivity and solidarity, as well as increasing the quantity and quality of food donated to the union in the weeks to come. All of this, in the words of one Minneapolis streetcar motorman, Howard Carlson, "radicalized people." As yet another conflict appeared inevitable in June 1934, Carlson could see that the leadership of Local 574 "really knew what to do. ... It wasn't a private affair. Everybody came. Everybody was welcome."¹¹⁸

Cannon summed up the accomplishments of the Trotskyists in Minneapolis, evident in May – June 1934. He situated the Minneapolis strike as arguably the most important of a series of labor battles that followed on the heels of the

118 The above paragraphs draw on Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 135–136; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 103–105, 108–109; Scholl, "Socialist Women and Labor Struggles," 22; "Minneapolis Notes: The Organizer," *The Militant*, 23 June 1934; "Unions and the Unemployed," "Ladies Auxiliary Give Benefit Dance," "Union Study Class," "You are 'The Organizer,'" and "Finks!" *The Organizer*, 25 June 1934; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 159; Skoglund interviewed by Halstead, 24 April 1955, Transcript, 29–30, Box 2, Riehle Papers, MNHS; Walker, "The Farmer Holiday Convention," in File: "Farmer-Labor Party, Chapter 5"; File: "American City: The Organizer Notes"; File: "Local 574 Strike 1934"; Carlos Hudson, 31-page Typescript, all in Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS. Under the title "Strike Deputies," *The Organizer*, 2 July 1934, began publishing an alphabetized list of names/addresses of the "blackjack artists" who had tried to break the May strike.

first wave of strikes that greeted the introduction of the National Recovery Act. Among the upheavals that figured prominently in this upsurge of class conflict were two nation-wide automobile strikes, generalized strikes in the steel and coal industries, and numbers of smaller industrial disturbances involving hundreds of thousands of workers. These class conflicts, in the words of Charles Rumford Walker, “were scotched before they began.” Government-appointed mediators orchestrated agreements that left workers no better off than “where they started.”¹¹⁹

It was from this vantage point that Cannon insisted that the compromises of the Minneapolis May 1934 settlement were “a victory of the first order”:

The first and foremost demand in every struggle is: *Recognition of the union*. With unerring instinct the workers seek first of all the protection of an organization. ... The outcome of every strike is to be estimated primarily by its success or failure in enforcing the recognition of the union. And from this point of view the results in general are not so rosy. The workers manifested a mighty impulse for organization, and in many cases they fought heroically. But they have yet to attain their first objective. ... The New York hotel strike failed to establish the union. The New York taxi drivers got no union recognition, or anything else. Not a single one of the ‘Red’ unions affiliated to the Trade Union Unity League has succeeded in gaining recognition. Even the great battle of Toledo appears to have been concluded without the attainment of this primary demand. The American workers are on the march. They are organizing by the hundreds of thousands. They are fighting to establish their new unions firmly and compel the bosses to ‘recognize’ them. But in the overwhelming majority of cases they have yet to win this fundamental demand. In the light of this general situation the results of the Minneapolis strike stands out preeminent and unique.

Noting that much had rightly been demanded of the Trotskyists in Minneapolis, Cannon was confident that their spring season planted vitally important seeds that would give rise to new developments of great importance in the historical transformation of the labor movement. “On a local scale, in a small sector of the labor movement,” he closed his assessment of the first phase of the Minneapolis teamsters’ rebellion, “the Minneapolis comrades have set an

119 Cannon, “Minneapolis and Its Meaning,” *New International*, 1 (July 1934), 3–5; Walker, *American City*, 161–162.

example which shows the way. The International Communists have every right to be proud of this example and to hold it up as a model to study and to follow.”¹²⁰

15 Toward the July Days

The May 1934 settlement began unravelling before its terms even appeared in print, but despite this setback Cannon's central argument about what was accomplished was powerfully confirmed. Having achieved a *de facto* recognition of the General Drivers' Union, the ambiguous agreement negotiated by Dobbs and others, admittedly skirted and evaded by the trucking bosses, provided space for the union to grow, educate its members and a broader labor constituency, and to enter the next round of struggle in a stronger position. In the process, the political perspectives of Minneapolis workers widened, as was evidenced by the increasing number of calls for a General Strike that echoed in Central Labor Union halls. Local 574 was building itself into a formidable agent of broad working-class struggle.

Teamster head Dan Tobin confided to New Deal labour-reform architect, Senator Robert F. Wagner, that the Local 574 insurgency had reached the point where there was little he, or any other conservative trade union official, could do to keep things under control. “The truckers,” Tobin confessed, “organized themselves and were making their own battle.” Tobin would continue his efforts to suppress teamster militancy in Minneapolis, but he now knew that he faced an uphill fight.¹²¹

After a mass meeting of Local 574 decided to press forward with demands honoring the original strike settlement, including higher wages and reduced hours, it invited all transport unions in Minneapolis to a strike conference. Preparations were made “to call the Employers bluff” and back up the claims for justice with “a city-wide tie-up.” As Local 574's *The Organizer* declared:

¹²⁰ The above paragraphs draw on James P. Cannon, “Minneapolis and Its Meaning,” *The New International*, 1 (July 1934), 3–5. For further comment on the Communist Party's attack on the Trotskyist leadership of the 1934 strikes, extending into 1935, see Skoglund interviewed by Halstead, 24 April 1955, Transcript, 31–32, Box 2, Riehle Papers, MNHS; Harry Strang [Herbert Solow], “A Labor Lieutenant and Top Sergeant,” *New International*, 2 (August 1935), 165–166.

¹²¹ Smemo, “The Politics of Labor Militancy in Minneapolis,” 33, quoting “Washington Sized Up Truck Driver Strike,” *Minneapolis Labor Review*, 29 June 1934.

The Employers, following custom [that] has been popular among them in the past, continue to dodge, stall, and chisel. ... These bosses are now attempting to reorganize their forces to swindle the members of 574. ... the trade unions as a unit must move on to the battle front prepared for a finish fight. The issue is clear. A Union city where men and women can feel and enjoy the benefits of Union security, and a decent standard of life – or Minneapolis ruled by Black reaction in the hands of the profit mad Bosses.

The trucking firms claimed to be abiding by the agreement, and the impasse at the Regional Labor Board seemed unable to be resolved. In his report to the CLA's New York National Executive Committee [NC] Cannon pressed for a League organizer to be dispatched from Chicago to assist the Minneapolis comrades.¹²²

The broad leadership of Local 574 relied on the active support of the Minneapolis branch of the Communist League of America, whose ranks were bolstered by a growing number of recruits. In early July 1934, with a strike obviously pending, the League's national leadership decided to "concentrate all its efforts on the Minneapolis situation, every member to be asked to give a full day's pay and that we speed up the raising of the necessary means with all funds received to be recorded for the organization and press campaign." The NC was unanimous in its agreement that League members who were "especially qualified to play key assisting roles" proceed to Minneapolis immediately. Cannon left New York at the end of the first week of July 1934, followed shortly by Max Shachtman and Herbert Solow, an experienced journalist who later edited *Fortune* magazine. Their assignment was to help produce *The Organizer*. Solow, who often wrote under the pen-name Herbert Strang, was so popular with the ranks that he was made a lifetime honorary member of Local 574. Dobbs, officially listed as editor of the Local 574 publication, was too busy with other tasks and, while undoubtedly talented and capable, had at this juncture no particular training or experience, let alone the time, to oversee a workers' bulletin,

122 Clem Forsen, "Tactics at Minneapolis," *The Militant*, 30 June 1934; "Local 574 Calls Strike Conference," *The Organizer*, 25 June 1934, reprinted as "Minneapolis Union Forcing Wage Demands," *The Militant*, 30 June 1934; "Truck Firms Deny Evading Agreement," *Minneapolis Journal*, 1 July 1934; "Truck Union Says Firms Ignore Pact," *Minneapolis Journal*, 2 July 1934; "US Moves to Avert New Truck Strike," *Minneapolis Journal*, 3 July 1934. Cannon reported on the organizational needs of Minneapolis at the National Executive Committee meeting of 20 June 1934, moving a motion that the Chicago branch raise funds to send John Edwards as an organizer. See CLA, National Executive Committee Minutes, 20 June 1934, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers.

especially one poised to become a daily. Shachtman and Solow undertook most of the editorial work for *The Organizer*, with help from Cannon and Carlos Hudson, a Minneapolis Trotskyist with journalistic aptitude, as well as other volunteers from the CLA and the union. Albert Goldman, recently recruited to the League from the Communist Party in Chicago, came on board as Local 574's lawyer. Hugo Oehler also made his way to Minneapolis, where he was assigned to assist with work among the unemployed, a field in which the CLA members had already won considerable influence through helping to establish the Minneapolis Central Council of Workers.

A jocular masthead, ostensibly from an August issue of *The Organizer*, but in fact printed as a very limited run for the amusement of the editorial staff and Local 574 insiders, reflected the lively atmosphere in the editorial office. Dobbs was listed as "Fall Guy," and Hudson as "End Man." Cannon and Shachtman, under the pseudonyms of Jim McGee and Max Marsh, were listed respectively as "Office Boy" and "St. Paul Correspondent." Albert Goldman was the "Mouthpiece" and Herbert Solow was billed as the "Guest Conductor." Marvel Scholl Dobbs was assigned the tag of "Military Reporter." Bill Brown, "the Three Dunne Sisters," and Carl Skoglund were simply "Stooges."¹²³

NRA-sponsored negotiators met with Governor Olson, Regional Labor Board officials, and representatives from both the union and the employers, but little headway was made by the end of the first week of July 1934. The Employers' Advisory Committee, engaging in a bit of public grandstanding, offered the General Drivers' Union \$1000 if it could convince a panel of three judges that the trucking firms were in violation of the May settlement. The union declined to participate in any such sideshow, and instead hammered away at the fundamental issues: wages and inclusion of "inside workers" in all collective bargaining activities. As negotiations got underway, Local 574 organized a massive 6 PM parade of protest on Friday, 6 July 1934, followed by a huge meeting at the Municipal Auditorium. The parade slogan, "Make Minneapolis a Union Town," was greeted with enthusiasm and a wide variety of organizations, including the State university's Social Problems Club, signed up to participate.¹²⁴

¹²³ Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 105–106, which depicts the joke masthead, mistakenly states that it appeared in *The Organizer*, 25 August 1934; however, this is not the case. For a copy see File: "American City: The Organizer Notes," Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS. See also Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 154–155; Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 104–105; Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 72–73; CLA, National Executive Committee Minutes, 5 July 1934, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers.

¹²⁴ "Truck Dispute Meeting is Set for Tomorrow," *Minneapolis Journal*, 4 July 1934; "Truck Dispute Parlay Friday," *Minneapolis Journal*, 5 July 1934; "Dunnigan in Closed Meet with Union," *Minneapolis Journal*, 6 July 1934; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 109–111.

The motorcycle couriers from the May strike led the march, clearing the way through the working-class throng, whose orderly columns stretched well past the eighteen block route of the parade. Next came the parade's Grand Marshal, Ed Hudson, a Farmer-Labor Party alderman astride an impressive white steed. Dobbs recalled that in placing Hudson on such "prominent display," Local 574 intended to "make it harder for him to chicken out on us when the going got rough." A musicians' union band struck a note both festive and defiant, and behind it marched Local 574, its red bunting banner flying overhead, and the Women's Auxiliary. Supportive unionists, farmers, ex-servicemen, and students rounded out the massive march, their placards proclaiming "We Support 574," "Down with the Citizens Alliance," and "Bosses Do Not Want a Union, We Workers Do." Other labor contingents included the street railway employees, laundry/dry-cleaning workers, building tradesmen, electricians, brewery workers, printers, petroleum workers, upholsterers, municipal employees, iron workers, railroaders, men and women of the garment trades, and unemployed workers from both the united-front oriented Minneapolis Central Council of Workers and the Communist Party-led Unemployed Councils. Two airplanes circled the parade route, each emblazoned with a huge 574. Some 6,000 mostly sympathetic onlookers cheered the parade from sidewalks, alleys, and adjacent buildings. 12,000 crowded into the Auditorium, while thousands more congregated outside, where loudspeakers had been set up to broadcast the speeches to those who could not make their way into the packed hall. Some claimed that the rally was "the largest mass meeting in the history of Minneapolis."

The speakers list at the rally included the Chairman of the Local Building Trades Council, A.H. Urtubees; Roy Weir of the Central Labor Union; Emery Nelson of the Teamsters' Joint Council; Farmers' Holiday Association leader, John Bosch; garment worker spokeswoman and Women's Auxiliary member, Myrtle Harris; and W.J. McGaughren of the Railway Clerks union. These workers' advocates attacked the trucking bosses and the Citizens' Alliance for failing to honor the terms of the May agreement, calling for the entire labor movement to rally around the standard of Local 574. Miles Dunne addressed the "red-baiting" of Local 574's leadership head on:

They have now raised the red issue and accused us of being reds and radicals ... of wanting to substitute a new form of government and I say to you here frankly when a system of society exists that allows employers in Minneapolis to wax fat on the misery and starvation and degradation of the many, it is time that system is changed, it is high time that the workers take this from their hands and take for themselves at least a fair share of all the wealth they produce.

General Drivers' Union President Bill Brown drew applause when he declared that Minneapolis wasn't big enough for both the repugnant Alliance and the unions. Alluding to the May strike, Brown warned that working-class taxpayers were not prepared to sit back and watch the police attack strikers in any future conflict. "I want to say there is not a fair employer unless we are burying them," he snorted in a remark that drew considerable laughter. The mass meeting set a deadline of 11 July 1934 for voting on strike action, unanimously resolving that Local 574 represented all workers in the trucking sphere (including "inside workers"); that all union members should receive a wage hike retroactive to 26 May 1934; and that the bosses must sign an agreement with the General Drivers' Union. To wild applause, the gathering endorsed the maxim that "An injury to one is an injury to all workers from *now on!*"¹²⁵

Between the mass march and rally of Friday evening and the Wednesday, 11 July, date when Local 574's membership would conduct a strike vote, federal mediator Eugene H. Dunnigan attempted, unsuccessfully, to pull a rabbit out of the Regional Labor Board's mediation hat. Cannon always advised trade unionists to keep their distance from the likes of Dunnigan, whose intent was to see the workers "outmaneuvered and cut to pieces, ... their strike broken by the 'friends of labor'" in the Roosevelt administration. Dunnigan's stock was never very high with the leadership of Local 574. Dobbs recalled him showing up at strike headquarters, "cocky as hell, with a black ribbon on his pince-nez and four cigars showing in the pocket of his coat," boasting of the "many strikes he had settled" while claiming to be on the workers' side.

Women's Auxiliary leader Marvel Scholl and head nurse Vera "Mac" McCormack had some fun at Dunnigan's expense while he waited to meet the Organizing Committee. The two women drew up an order for hospital supplies, embellishing the growing list with gruesome accounts of how various items would be needed in the weeks of battle to come. Dunnigan's "eyes began to pop." Sweating profusely, squirming in his chair, and tapping his patrician umbrella nervously on the floor, the federal mediator was finally ushered

125 The above paragraphs draw on Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 109–111; Walker, *American City*, 159–160; "New Truck Drivers Strike Impends in Minneapolis," *The Militant*, 7 July 1934; C.H., "10,000 March in Big Labor Parade," *The Militant*, 14 July 1934; "Truck Parley goes on After Labor Meet," *Minneapolis Journal*, 7 July 1934; "Mass Demonstration of Unions, Friday July 6, Bridge Square to Auditorium," *The Organizer*, 2 July 1934; Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 236; Carlos Hudson, "Chains Wear Thin in Minneapolis: Notes and Sketches on the Recent Strikes," 10–12, in File: "Local 574 Strike 1934," Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS. On Myrtle Harris, who would figure prominently in organizing women workers and in Farmer-Labor campaigns throughout the 1930s, see Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle*, 106–107, 120, 125, 142, 161.

into his meeting with the Trotskyist strike leadership. The two women laughed until their sides ached.

Dunnigan got off on the wrong foot by absurdly proposing that he be made Local 574's "representative in all negotiations with the bosses." Brown, Dobbs, the Dunne brothers, and Skoglund countered that they would be happy to have the federal mediator take their demands to the bosses and return to them with a response so that he could get further instructions. This was not what Dunnigan had in mind; the elegantly-attired official "left in a huff." His discussions with employer representatives and Regional Labor Board officials also failed to produce anything substantial. Brown and Dobbs contrasted the opaque language used in these mediation processes, and the clear, simple wording of the truck drivers' demands. When a Board official offered to provide a lawyer for the Local 574 team, one militant with twenty years of experience driving a truck quipped, "Why – we can all speak English." Lawyers were not going to alter the simple fact that the union and the trucking bosses were not making headway, and a strike was in the offing. That strike, said Local 574 leaders, might well make May events "look like an ice cream social."¹²⁶

As the 11 July strike vote approached, the capitalist press escalated its ongoing propaganda war. Dan Tobin's views that the Teamsters did not endorse either the leadership of Local 574 or the use of sympathetic or general strikes, and that he would never "approve the violation of a signed contract," were put to good use by Minneapolis dailies. The *Minneapolis Journal* cited approvingly Tobin's conservative credo: "The reason we have raised our union from an organization which was the lowest rung in the ladder of trade unions, is because we have kept our word and our bond with our employers, with our membership, and with the public." Praise of this style of impotent, craft conscious business unionism was combined with denunciation of the communist leadership of the General Drivers' Union, and its "program of disorder and violence," pursued for "anarchistic purposes." Calling on all "law-abiding and liberty-loving workingmen" to reject "such an evil conspiracy," the *Journal* castigated Local 574's appeal to other Minneapolis trade unions to engage in a sympathetic strike under its "red flag for a regime of blood and viol-

¹²⁶ Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 112–114; "Labor Board Acts to Settle Truck Strife," *Minneapolis Journal*, 8 July 1934; "Truck Union Accepts Board Helper Ruling," *Minneapolis Journal*, 9 July 1934; Untitled manuscript fragment, 24–25, in File: "Notes Local 574 and Strike," Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS; and, for Cannon's caustic comment on federal mediators, *History of American Trotskyism*, 156–158. For a clear public statement by Local 574 on the role of the Regional Labor Board see "What the Labor Board Means to the Union," *The Organizer*, 2 July 1934.

ence." While Local 574's "ostensible object" was unionizing "all of the city's industries and business enterprises," the real purpose of the General Drivers' Union, according to the *Journal*, was more nefarious. It was intent on nothing less than enlisting "Minneapolis in the revolution ... for the overthrow of the Constitution and the laws of the land, for the violent transformation of our democratic-representative system of government into a Communist dictatorship." To counter this tyrannical plot, the paper demanded that Governor Olson "use every means in his power to guarantee and protect the freedom of the streets for transportation."

This ideological offensive produced vacillation among a layer of timid trade union officials. Robert Fleming, Bill Brown's equivalent as President of the St. Paul General Drivers and Helpers Union, Local 120, was quoted by the *Journal* as stating that his members would not be walking out in support of Local 574 because in St. Paul they did not want inside workers in the union. Brotherhood had its limits. "No chicken pluckers," he was quoted as saying. Two days later Fleming, whose anti-strike remarks presumably reflected pressure from Tobin and the IBT central leadership, performed an about-face at a Central Labor Union forum, protesting that he had been misrepresented by the Minneapolis newspaper. St. Paul nurtured grievances similar to those currently raised by the Minneapolis teamsters. Repudiating Tobin's red-baiting and claiming that "we are for common action," Fleming promised that a strike vote of his union would be conducted within a few days to ascertain the views of his membership.¹²⁷

127 The above paragraphs draw on "What is Behind the Strike?" and "St. Paul Strike Threat Vanishes; Drivers Say They are Satisfied," *Minneapolis Journal*, 10 July 1934; "Daniel Tobin goes to Bat for the Bosses," and "Red Herring Cover for Real Issues," *The Militant*, 14 July 1934; "Twin Cities Transport Strike Looms," and "Red Scare Raised in Attempt to Break Union," *The Organizer*, 9 July 1934; James P. Cannon, "Central Labor Union Backs Drivers' Local," *The Militant*, 14 July 1934. In contrast to the claims of President Fleming of the St. Paul General Drivers Union relating to limiting membership in the International Brotherhood of Teamsters see "St. Paul and Minneapolis Station Attendants Merge with 120 and 574," *The Organizer*, 9 July 1934, and for Fleming's backtracking, "Labor Board Still Seeks to Avert Strike," *Minneapolis Journal*, 11 July 1934. For Tobin and IBT resistance to Local 574 militancy, see Smemo, "The Politics of Labor Militancy in Minneapolis," 35–35; Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict that Shaped American Unions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 163; "Fight with Tobin and Teamsters Joint Council," in File: "American City: Miscellaneous Notes (2)," Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS. An interesting discussion of the relative quietude of St. Paul workers compared to the militancy exhibited by Minneapolis labor appears in Mary Lethert Wingerd, *Claiming the City: Politics, Faith, and the Power of Place in St. Paul* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

On the night of 11 July 1934, Local 574 met at the Eagles Hall in East Minneapolis. General Drivers' Union leaders struck a militant tone, assailing the employers, the Citizens' Alliance, and the Regional Labor Board. The official strike call drafted by Local 574 after the three-and-a-half hour meeting included the following message for Tobin:

We note with the greatest indignation that D.J. Tobin, President of our International organization, has associated himself with the diabolical game of the bosses by publishing a slanderous attack on our leadership in the official magazine. The fact that this attack has become part of the 'ammunition' of the bosses in their campaign to wreck our union, is enough for any intelligent worker to estimate it for what it really is. We say plainly to D.J. Tobin: If you can't act like a Union man, and help us, instead of helping the bosses, then at least have the decency to stand aside and let us fight our battle alone. We did it in the organization campaign and in the previous strike and we can do it again. We received absolutely no help of any kind from you. Our leadership and our guidance has come from our local leaders, and them alone. We put our confidence in them and will not support any attack on them under any circumstances.

An Auxiliary speaker was applauded enthusiastically when she declared that the women would "fight side by side with the men to the finish." Cannon reported to *The Militant* that the spirit of solidarity in Minneapolis was rising to new heights, with many members of other unions gathered outside the Eagles Hall awaiting the strike vote decision. The outcome was never in doubt and, after lengthy discussion, the assembly endorsed job action by a unanimous standing vote. The meeting concluded by instructing the Organizing Committee and Local 574's Executive to develop a strike strategy.

Strike talk spread quickly to other unions. Organizations of building tradesmen, barbers, auto mechanics, retail clerks, dental mechanics, upholsterers, street railway workers, and various others discussed what to do. Central Labor Union delegates pledged full support and endorsed the General Drivers' Union's strike resolution without dissent. In response to federal mediator Dunigan's plea for a five-day extension of the strike deadline, midnight on Monday evening, 16 July 1934, was established as the time when the walkout clock would start ticking. This gave Local 574 a few needed days to elect a Strike Committee of 100 and to schedule a final meeting at which a secret strike ballot, mandatory under the International union's bylaws, could be conducted. "The lines are drawn," *The Militant*, commented. "The strikers are determined The uni-

ons have pledged their support.”¹²⁸ The July 1934 confrontation was shaping up entirely differently than the strike of two months earlier. Capital dug in its heels; labor was eager to test its new-found strength; and state authorities were aware that Minneapolis teamsters were not to be trifled with.

The trucking bosses and their Alliance supporters readied for an all-out battle, but they began with a preliminary softening-up public relations campaign to discredit the union, erode rank-and-file morale, and warn of the risks Minneapolis would face if law and order was not “rigidly enforced.” Vitriolic editorialists in the mainstream press denounced “outlaw strikers” and appealed to the “self-respecting, upstanding men of Organized Labor” to break from Local 574’s leaders and their “evil conspiracy,” which could only result in a “harvest of hardships” and a probable “sequel of violence and bloodshed.” Without “respect for its pledges, [and] no pride in keeping its covenants,” the “traitorous” leadership of the General Drivers’ Union was depicted as doing the devil’s work, unlike the “real union men of Minneapolis,” for whom “honor” and “solemn agreements” mattered.

Joseph R. Cochran of the Employers’ Advisory Committee, representing 166 transport companies, insisted that although Local 574 was in violation of the May settlement order drafted by the Regional Labor Board, conflict could still be avoided through appropriate arbitration avenues of dispute resolution. He disingenuously claimed that the bosses’ committee had always been “ready to negotiate with chicken pluckers or any other workers through any representatives whom they may select.” Designed to sound reasonable, Cochran’s statement amounted to a repudiation of Local 574’s claims to be the rightful bargaining agent of the “inside workers.” The main thrust of the employers’ propaganda offensive was a red-baiting attack on the ostensible hidden agenda of the Trotskyists leading the General Drivers’ Union. “So long as communists in control of the truck drivers’ union are determined that there shall be a strike in the hope that victory will greatly enhance their personal power and create one big union with all trades grouped into one body – vesting power in the hands of a few communist leaders,” Cochran declared in a 12 July 1934 statement, Minneapolis was at the mercy of those dedicated to “completely ... paralyze all [of its] industry.” This made “avoidance of a strike ... difficult.”

¹²⁸ Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 114–116; “Strike Call of Local 574: Unanimously Adopted at General Membership Meeting, Wednesday July 11,” and Herbert Capelis, “A Trade Unionist Views the Strike Meeting of Local 574,” *The Organizer*, 16 July 1934; “Tobin Goes to Bat for the Bosses,” and Cannon, “Central Labor Union Backs Drivers’ Local,” *The Militant*, 14 July 1934; “Leaders in Truck Dispute Define Stand on Terms,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 9 July 1934; “Labor Board Still Seeks to Avert Strike,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 11 July 1934.

These employer missives were supplemented by announcements from Police Chief Johannes. He declared that a recently-augmented municipal force was committed to protect life and property in the event of a strike. "[E]very man in the police department will be put in uniform to see that law and order is upheld," Johannes promised. There was no talk, in mid-July 1934, of relying on "special deputies." Instead Johannes, Mayor A.G. Bainbridge, and Sheriff John Wall declared that "the minute the strike is called we will ask the Governor to send the National Guard to aid us in our duties."¹²⁹

Conservative elements within the labor movement began mobilizing to try to undercut rising working-class sentiment for sympathetic, general strikes. In St. Paul pressure was put on the Brotherhood of Teamsters Local 120 to backtrack from President Fleming's earlier flip-flop in which he ended up supporting his counterparts in Minneapolis. Trucking unions in other Minnesota locales – Duluth, Superior, and Fargo-Moorhead – were leaned on by International Vice-President, John Geary, to honor contracts and refuse to engage in sympathetic strike action. Geary declared that Local 574's resolution to strike was taken without International sanction, was "illegal under union laws and ... that if the strike went into effect it [would] be an outlaw strike from the standpoint of the national organization." Tobin's emissary further decreed that any Teamster local supporting the Minneapolis strikers would also be engaging in illegal activities.

At a four-hour meeting of the St. Paul truckers, in which the oratory was described as "bitter," Bill Brown, Miles Dunne, and Vincent Ray Dunne locked horns with Geary and other conservative union leaders, urging rank-and-file drivers to support the strike movement. They pointed out that whatever gains workers in the Twin Cities trucking industry achieved since May were a consequence of the audacious fighting spirit of the Minneapolis local. In a highly contentious decision opposed by many, a secret ballot was conducted after the hall of 500 was cleared of all but St. Paul Local 120 members. The vote was 167–128 to support the strike actions of their fraternal General Drivers' Union members in Minneapolis, but Geary insisted that the International's constitution required a two-thirds majority to call any strike action, and so the proposal was lost. Disappointed that barely 300 of the union's 1500 members voted, Local 120 President Fleming announced he would be seeking a second meeting, in which another vote would be conducted.

129 The above paragraphs draw on "Mayor and Sheriff to Demand Troops When Strike is Called," *Minneapolis Journal*, 13 July 1934; "An Outlaw Strike," "Truck Strike Gets 3 Hard Jolts in Day," and "Communist Control of Strikes," *Minneapolis Journal*, 13 July 1934.

Within Local 574, a grandiosely-named Committee of 25, led by conservative trucker Robert E. Johnstone, echoed the sentiments of the employers and the mainstream press, demanding that Bill Brown, the Dunne brothers, and Skoglund “resign their positions.” Claiming to speak for the majority of Local 574 members, this group met with the established leadership of the General Drivers’ Union at the Central Labor Union hall and raised all of the usual allegations and criticisms emanating from both the Employers’ Advisory Committee and Dan Tobin’s International Teamsters’ officialdom. Johnstone pontificated: “There won’t be any strike. You can bank on that.” Claiming that the existing leadership of Local 574 was too radical, that it was “tainted with communism,” and that it had “mismanaged” relations with the employers, precipitating the membership into an “outlaw strike” that threatened their union charter, Johnstone broke decisively with the entire strategic orientation of the Minneapolis teamster insurgency. Recognizing that a variety of groups worked within the trucking industry, Johnstone claimed that there should be one union of drivers and helpers, but that each other employment sector should “handle its own problems.” Johnstone and his right-wing Committee of 25 received extensive press coverage, but rallied no substantial support within Local 574 and were easily brushed aside.

On the Sunday afternoon before the strike was to begin, Reverend William Brown convened a 3 P.M. meeting to demand a secret ballot strike vote. This “rump” mobilization was thought within Local 574 to originate with the bosses, and one journalist claimed that it had been organized by the clergyman Brown “and a scab.” Robert E. Johnstone likely had a hand in the proceedings, which convened in Brown’s church. Five hundred attended, but it became clear that the vast majority present were not sympathetic to the purpose of the meeting. With cries of “yellow” and “stool pigeon for the employers” flung at the pulpit, Jack Soule, who chaired the committee that called the meeting could not be heard beyond the first three rows of pews. He was soon elbowed off the rostrum by Grant and Ray Dunne and Carl Skoglund. Taking charge of the proceedings, Grant Dunne castigated the “underhand effort ... to split the union,” and criticized “the conducting of a meeting in a church or at any place outside the regular union headquarters.” The meeting was now firmly in the hands of the Local 574 leadership. Bill Brown explained to all of those present, some of whom apparently accepted the employer claims that “One Big Union” in the trucking industry was a subversive endeavor, that in fact this was exactly what was at stake in the union struggle: “The charge had been made that the leaders planned to build a union so large and powerful that it could control industry. That was precisely the intention.” When International Brotherhood Vice-President John Geary rose, predictably, to speak out against general and

sympathetic strikes, so-called illegal job actions, and the obligations of trade union officials, he was roundly jeered by the now increasingly agitated audience. Grant Dunne had to appeal for “more respectful” behavior, insisting on conduct that “befitted a house of worship.” One of the organizers of the anti-leadership event was eventually escorted to the speakers’ stand, where he repudiated his role in calling the meeting and confessed that it had been “a big mistake.” Resolutions were moved and passed expressing confidence in the leadership of the union. M.E. Carlson wrote in *The Organizer* that with the Communist Party, Dan Tobin, and the employers all castigating the Dunnes, Dobbs, Skoglund, and Brown, “No one loves the poor leadership except the truck drivers.”¹³⁰

16 A Strike Declared; A Plot Exposed

Marathon mediation sessions at the Regional Labor Board produced little movement by either the union or the trucking firms. The EAC agreed to arbitrate the wages of “warehouse employees” at 22 market firms and requested a list of union members. This represented a crack in the previously solid rejection of recognizing any “inside workers” as part of the General Drivers’ Union, but it came with the stipulation that it was not to be considered a precedent for any of the remaining 144 trucking operations. Local 574, wary about a possible ulterior motive, responded: “We show no membership books to bosses or their agents, so that they may establish a blacklist against Union men.” At the final Eagles Hall strike ratification vote on Monday evening, 16 July 1934, over 2500 unionists voted unanimously to strike.

130 The above paragraphs draw on “An Outlaw Strike,” and “Truck Strike Gets 3 Hard Jolts in Day,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 13 July 1934; “Groups from Union signs Call for New Strike Vote Tomorrow,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 14 July 1934; “Union Revolt Threatens Strike Chiefs – Group Asks Leaders Quit; Anti-Strike Meeting Called,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 15 July 1934; “As Zero hour for Walkout Nears,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 16 July 1934; “‘Sunday Opposition’ Meeting Becomes Strike Demonstration,” *The Organizer*, 17 July 1934; Skoglund interviewed by Halstead, 24 April 1955, Typescript, 30, Box 2, Riehle Papers, MNHS; Carlos Hudson, “Chains Wear Thin in Minneapolis: Notes and Sketches on the Recent Strikes,” 13–14, File: “Local 574 Strike 1934,” Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS; Anne Ross, “Labor Unity in Minneapolis,” *New Republic* (25 July 1934), 285; Solow, “War in Minneapolis,” 160; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 116; Tselos, “The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s,” 237; Korth, *the Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 144–145; M.E. Carlson, “Nobody Loves ‘Em,” *The Organizer*, 16 July 1934.

"It was a hot night," recalled Farrell Dobbs, "and the hall was packed with sweltering workers who were in a fighting mood." The meeting affirmed confidence in the union's leaders and condemned Citizens' Alliance red baiting, rejecting the necessity to undertake a secret ballot. A Committee of 100 was elected, with full authority to make decisions during the walkout. This broad body included Teamster Executive Board officials like Cliff Hall as well as the leading Trotskyist nucleus of Local 574 and its close supporters, but in its majority was composed of worker militants who had proven their mettle during the May strike. Dobbs and Vincent Ray Dunne were designated a contact committee of two and given responsibility for negotiating with employers. But their actions and recommendations were subject to ratification by the larger, 100-strong Strike Committee. This set-up allowed the conservative elements aligned with Tobin and the International to have input in decision-making, at the same time that it deprived them of overall control of the union for the duration of the strike. Union strategy and dealings with the employers' committees and/or mediators were effectively in the hands of the three Dunne brothers, Skoglund, Dobbs, and their staunch ally, Local 574 President, Bill Brown. This group clearly had the confidence of the overwhelming majority of the union membership.

The Organizer was quickly converted to a daily strike bulletin, with Cannon, Shachtman, and Oehler doing most of the writing. Over the course of five weeks from mid-July to late August 1934 Cannon himself contributed at least eight articles to the *Daily Strike Bulletin*, which he often later referred to as *The Organizer*. The strike bulletin proved an effective source of information, humor, political education, and encouragement for the strikers and their supporters. With its print run bumped up to nearly 12,000, it was "sold" for what consumers could cough up, although some donations were as high as \$5.00. The paper covered its own production costs and also helped underwrite the union commissary. "The morale of the strikers was kept up by" *The Organizer*, Cannon recalled a decade later, but above all the role of this "powerful instrument" was as an educator. Day after day workers had access to accurate up-to-date information about their struggle. "The striking workers were armed and prepared in advance," noted Cannon, and "The *Daily Organizer* covered the town like a blanket." An unambiguous success story, Cannon thought publication of the daily strike bulletin "the greatest of all the weapons in the arsenal of the Minneapolis strike. I can say without any qualification that of all the contributions we made, the most decisive, the one that tipped the scale to victory, was the publication of the daily paper." In a September 1934 retrospective, Cannon contrasted the experience of strike organization in Minneapolis with that of the southern mill operatives, commenting: "the textile workers, half a mil-

lion strong, had to depend on the capitalist press for information – Local 574 of Minneapolis published *a daily paper of its own!*¹³¹

The strike commenced, as announced, at midnight, Monday 16 July 1934. Anne Ross observed in the *New Republic*, “The real issue of the strike is now: not merely the right of higher wages for men who ride the trucks, but the right of labor unity.” Herbert Solow put the matter similarly in *The Nation*: “How, asked the union leaders, can we compromise? Either we have a right to represent our members or we have not; if the bosses say we have not, we’ll go out.” The most clear-cut declaration came from the General Drivers’ Union itself: “Ours is the cause of the whole labor movement. Should we be defeated, we who are intrenched [sic] in the key industry of transportation, the other unions in Minneapolis would be chopped down one by one. Every labor organization would be endangered. Should we be victorious, it means a strengthening of the whole labor movement, it means a tremendous step forward in making Minneapolis a Union town.” Solow aptly commented that Local 574 was engaged in “making labor history in the city of Minneapolis.”¹³²

131 The above paragraphs draw on Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 145–146; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 116–122; Anne Ross, “Minnesota Sets Some Precedents,” *New Republic* (12 September 1934), 121; “The Strike is On! Members Cheer Confidence Vote in Union Heads,” and “Jobless Support Strike,” *The Organizer*, 17 July 1934; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 158–160; Cannon, “The Strike Wave and the Left Wing,” *New Internationalist*, 1 (September – October 1934), 67–68. In lauding *The Organizer*, the claim was made that it was the first daily workers’ paper to appear in the United States during a strike situation. This was untrue. Cannon and the Trotskyist Dunne brothers may well have known that claims about the *Daily Organizer* being the first such paper in the history of American labor were overstated. William F. Dunne had edited a daily newspaper in the midst of a violent metal-trades strike in Butte, Montana in 1917–18. Dunne was the chairman of the Joint Strike Committee and, in this capacity, put out the *Butte Daily Bulletin*, official organ of the Montana State Federation of Labor and the Butte Central Labor Council. Four years later, in a 1921 speech to the Workers’ Party Convention, Dunne recalled the importance of this publication, and stressed that it was defended against corporate attack by an armed workers’ defense guard. See “Speech of William F. Dunne, of Butte, Montana, before the Workers’ Party Convention, Monday December 26, 1921,” provided by David Riehle; and discussion of Dunne and the Butte paper in Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking, 1957), 316. Cannon’s *Daily Strike Bulletin* journalism included: “Strike Call of Local 574,” 16 July 1934; “If It Takes All Summer,” 29 July 1934; “Eternal Vigilance,” 6 August 1934; “Spilling the Dirt – a Bughouse Fable,” 8 August 1934; “Drivers’ Strike Reveals Workers’ Great Resources,” 11 August 1934; “Thanks to Pine County Farmers,” 13 August 1934; “The Spirit of Local 574,” 18 August 1934; “What the Union Means,” 23 August 1934. These pieces are conveniently collected in Cannon, *Notebook of an Agitator*, 75–94.

132 Ross, “Labor Unity in Minneapolis,” 286; Solow, “War in Minneapolis,” 160–161; “The Strike is On!,” *The Organizer*, 17 July 1934.

Little had been left to chance. A legal staff was assembled, consisting of trusted CLAer Albert Goldman, Rand Tower, Irving Green, and Fred A. Ossanna of Ossanna, Hall, and Hoaglund. Close links with other unions were consolidated, and jobless workers affiliated with the Unemployed Councils and the MCCW issued buttons officially identifying them as union supporters, and assigned duties. As in May, Local 574 set up strike headquarters in a two-storey garage building and outfitted it with loudspeakers, vehicle bays, beds, commissary, and infirmary. Many of the same personnel, including Dr. McCrimmon and Nurse McCormack, were back on the job. Located at 215 South Eighth Street, the new strike headquarters was across the street from the Minneapolis Club, "a swank setup patronized by the 'best families.'" The improved relationship with farmers and market gardeners meant that the larder of the union commissary was better stocked than it had been in May. Once again, the dispatching of flying pickets was a key assignment (this time supervised by Kelly Postal, Ray Dunne, Harry DeBoer, and Dobbs). A culture of involvement was encouraged as "nightly meetings were held at the strike headquarters for the workers to hear reports on the day's events, listen to guest speakers, and enjoy some form of entertainment." The firmly-established Women's Auxiliary played just as important a role in July as it had in May.

The July strike, like its May predecessor, was a model of careful preparation and organizational foresight. One innovation was that a Committee under Ray Rainbolt issued permits to individuals and firms seeking to move goods by truck during the strike. Hospitals, orphanages, and public works were supplied with necessities; oil trucks and filling stations were given more leeway than had been the case in May; taxis and unionized brewery, ice, milk, and bakery drivers were allowed to conduct business as usual. In an unusual bit of marketing, International Harvester was granted passage of some new trucks to a Chicago World's Fair display, provided they were paraded through city streets emblazoned with large banners declaring "Moved with Local 574's Permission." Harvester also made a donation to 574's cafeteria.¹³³

The Citizens' Alliance was also getting ready for the renewal of hostilities.¹³⁴ It managed to convince the owner of Local 574's new headquarters to lock his

133 Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 119–121; "Jobless Support Strike" and "Legal Staff for Strike," *The Organizer*, 17 July 1934; "Commissary to Move," *The Organizer*, 18 July 1934 (on the Women's Auxiliary); Korth, *The Minneapolis Truckers Strike of 1934*, 146; Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 238–239; Ross, "Labor Unity in Minneapolis," 285; Le Sueur, "What Happens in a Strike," 330–332.

134 For a thorough account of the Citizens' Alliance and the 1934 strikes see Millikan, *A Union Against Unions*, 264–287.

new tenants out of their rented premises on the eve of the declared strike. Undeterred, the Strike Committee of 100 broke into the Eighth Avenue building and began to plan Tuesday's picket activities. By 4 A.M., pickets established around the city, "all streets [were] guarded to prevent entrance or departure of trucks not excepted in the strike order." Governor Olson, who had loudly proclaimed his neutrality, immediately responded to a written request from Mayor Bainbridge to provide troops to protect citizens and property from harm during the strike. Olson mobilized one battalion of the Minnesota National Guard, having it assemble at the Fourth Avenue and Sixth Street armory "awaiting orders." Refusing to be cowed, the General Drivers' Union declared defiantly, "No truck is going to be moved. By nobody."¹³⁵

The first few days of the strike were, as they had been in May, quiet. Skoglund and Dobbs counselled the strikers not to provoke violence or make precipitous demands on other unionized workers. Workers walking strike lines, many of them more than willing to physically engage the police and others, were dissuaded from taking clubs or weapons of any kind, euphemistically referred to as "picket equipment," with them onto the streets. Union leaders requested firmly that all such materials be brought to the strike headquarters and left there for the time being. Aside from a few arrests of pickets for disorderly conduct, Minneapolis streets were tranquil, if tense; scarcely a truck was on the road.

The press hailed the coming of federal mediator Father Francis J. Haas, who arrived from Washington to bolster the flagging efforts of E.H. Dunnigan. Founder of the Catholic Conference on Industrial Problems and Director of the Carnegie Peace Union, Haas came highly recommended as "a consistent worker for old age pensions, for the rights of labor, [and a student] of crime and criminal injustice." But the Trotskyist leadership of the strike put little faith in this less than divine intervention. Referring to Dunnigan, Haas and their ilk, Cannon insisted "they never negotiated two cents out of the Trotskyist leaders of 574. They got a dose of negotiations and diplomacy which they are still gagging from. We wore out three of them before the strike was finally settled."¹³⁶

¹³⁵ "Last Minute Flash," *The Organizer*, 17 July 1934; "Truck Drivers Walk Out Again: Troops Called to Maintain Order – Picket Line Thrown out to Circle City," "Guard Unit Mobilized to be Ready for Strike Call," and "Governor Promises to Protect Citizens," *Minneapolis Journal*, 17 July 1934; "The Basis for Settlement," "Employers Plan to Shatter Line Flops Miserably," and "Citizen's Alliance Threatens Violence," *The Organizer*, 19 July 1934.

¹³⁶ The above paragraphs draw on "Strike is 100% Solid: Troops in Minneapolis for What?" and "No Scab Trucks Moving Around in Minneapolis," *The Organizer*, 18 July 1934; "Attempted Frame-Up Flops," *The Organizer*, 20 July 1934; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 119–120; Thomas E. Blantz, c.s.c., "Father Haas and the Minneapolis Truckers' Strike of 1934," *Minnesota History*, 42 (Spring 1970), 9; "Truck Strike Negotiations Wait Arrival of New U.S. Medi-

Haas arrived in Minneapolis with praise for “the attitude of frankness and open mindedness shown by both sides.” These words were barely out of his mouth when civic authorities attempted a deceitful end-run around Local 574.

On Thursday, 19 July 1934, Police Chief Johannes had five boxes of canned/bottled goods weighing a total of 150 pounds loaded into a five-ton truck that was escorted by eleven squad cars and 44 shotgun-toting police. Dispatched from the Market District, and outfitted with banners proclaiming “hospital supplies,” the object of this exercise was to symbolically breach the picket lines, hopefully with as much fanfare as possible. Photographers and movie cameramen were on hand to record the truck’s departure, and they were expecting fireworks when the caravan encountered union pickets. The press had already been tipped off about “the story,” and had actually printed a rendition of the events *before* anything transpired, what Charles Rumford Walker referred to as “a full and dramatic account of an episode *which was about to take place*.”

This orchestrated “hospital convoy,” the first attempt to move goods during the three-day old strike, was a deliberate provocation. Johannes and the Citizens’ Alliance types who concocted the scheme were well aware that Local 574 allowed free passage of anything needed to Minneapolis Hospital Council outlets, something that Local 574 publicized widely. Yet Johannes instructed his officers to move the packages and to resist any attempts to thwart their delivery. “Don’t take a beating,” he reportedly instructed his men, “you have shotguns and you know how to use them. ... When we are finished with this convoy there will be other goods to move.” *The Organizer* identified the sinister intent of the police plot: “The plan was to provoke a riot so that the cops would shoot down pickets, and Mayor Bainbridge and the bosses could howl for the militia to be brought out to move trucks.” Informed of what was about to happen by a sympathetic “inside worker,” Ray Dunne telephoned Police Chief Johannes to instruct him that the pickets were not interested in impeding the progress of the truck and to suggest that the sham convoy be called off. Outsmarted by the General Drivers’ Union, Johannes muttered that a messenger would be sent to stop the truck, but this never happened.

As the Minneapolis dailies proclaimed the picket lines broken, Dunne, Dobbs, and *The Organizer* broke the real story: “We refused to fall into the trap. All our cruising squads were recalled from the scene, and the delivery was allowed to go through without interference.” Selling some 10,000 copies on 20 July 1934, the daily strike bulletin assured its readers that while “The boss

ator,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 18 July 1934; “Truck Strike Accord Near, Haas Believes,” and “The Strategy of the Strike,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 19 July 1934; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 157.

press ... reports the whole incident as a serious break in the strike front ... [this is] an attempt to save something out of the failure of the plot. ... The picket lines are unbroken! The fight goes on!" Outraged that "The whole thing was a fake!", strikers responded to the hospital convoy fiasco with resolve. Brown called a mass meeting of Local 574 for that evening, capitalizing on labor's anger that Minneapolis's senior law enforcement officer would be guilty of attempting to provoke a bloody riot in the interests of the bosses. Mediators like Haas clearly had their work cut out for them: Dunne and Dobbs cancelled a negotiating meeting to protest the Police Chief's cynical disingenuousness, which could have led to deaths in the Market District.¹³⁷

17 Bloody Friday

Thursday's "hospital convoy" made it clear that the police were working in tandem with the Citizens' Alliance/Employers' Advisory Committee. Local 574's opponents were committed to moving trucks through picket lines, and they adopted aggressive and reckless means to this end. Cannon and others responded to the police provocation intent on both bolstering the fighting spirit of the ranks *and* preventing them from being drawn into senseless and counter-productive confrontation. Cannon's "dere emily" column framed the General Drivers' Union fight as a matter of justice and fairness. During the first days of the July strike, when Johannes told the press, "We are going to move trucks for those who want them moved, and our men are not going to be permitted to be hurt without 'striking back,'" the Police chief boasted, adding that the department had 200 shotguns at its disposal and 300 more were secured for that evening. Cannon had Mike writing to Emily:

i sorta feel calm and peaceful now – and strong and determined somehow to. i feel like i could fite on forever. You probably dont like so much to hear only about the strike and our Union all the time, but to tell the truth kid that seems to me about the biggest thing in my life right now. You probly cant see how a union means so much to a fella, but old 574, well i guess

¹³⁷ Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 124–125; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 147; Walker, *American City*, 164–166; "22 Armed Cars in convoy for Two Loads of Food," *Minneapolis Journal*, 20 July 1934; "150 Cops Convoy 150 Pounds of Freight in Five-Ton Truck," and "President Wm Brown Calls Big Meet of 574 Tonight," *The Organizer*, 20 July 1934; Maloney interviewed by Duffy and Miller, 16 August 1979, Transcript, 20–26, File: "Minneapolis Teamsters Strike 1934," Box 2, Maloney Papers, MNHS.

we all feel that it's the only thing now that's ever goin to do us any good, to get enough dough each week so as to live like human beings ought to live ... when i think of the way the guys at the Union stand by me and all, i get a lump in my throat. the other day ve, thats one of the Dunne brothers, comes up to me and asks in the kindest way that i shouldnt drink now while the strike is on. we got to be sober so we can fite harder and think faster he says, and so none of us are getting drunk now while the strike is on. honest, emily, i could crawl 5 miles on my belly through broken glass for guys like we got in our Union, and all the rest feels the same way to ... i feel like i could fite on and on forever, through Hell and Brimstone until the strike is one for good and all and when thats done im coming up some weekend to see you.

With striking union advocates receiving letters from trucking employers demanding their return to work within three days or they would be fired, Mike's letters to Emily aimed to shore up the job action during a period when Minneapolis's teamster revolt faced intensified opposition.¹³⁸

With newspaper headlines announcing that the San Francisco General Strike was now at "Zero Hour," a barricaded and tank-guarded Embarcadero patrolled by sentries armed with bayonets and machineguns, the Minneapolis Market District was, as in May, taunt with tension.¹³⁹ Mediation efforts by Father Haas and Governor Olson dead-ended; Chief of Police Mike Johannes proclaimed that the cops would protect any and all scab trucking operations. "It's law and order with me," was Johannes's blunt retort. Ray Dunne and Bill Brown replied by strengthening picket lines and insisting that, "The trucks will not move. ... You can depend on that." Dunne and Brown restrained rank-and-file militants, whose anger at armed police flaunting their weapons and provid-

138 Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 124–125; "22 Armed Cars in Convoy for Two Loads of Food," *Minneapolis Journal*, 20 July 1934; "letters to dere emily," *The Organizer*, 20 July 1934; Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 241. As indicated earlier in this chapter, I attribute authorship of this humor column to Cannon partly on the basis that it began and ended with Cannon's arrival in and departure from Minneapolis. It certainly fit well with Cannon's understandings of both the need to build the Women's Auxiliary and to bolster elementary trade union principles. The column's colloquial style also seems stamped with Cannon's authorship, but more importantly the "letters to emily" often contained reference to places such as Turtle Creek that were reminiscent of Cannon's boyhood. See my discussion of Cannon's youth and Turtle Creek in Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 31–35.

139 "Green Says Frisco Strike is Outlaw to Federation," and "Trappings of War Create Zero Hour in Frisco," *Minneapolis Journal*, 18 July 1934.

ing escorts to truck movements threatened to boil over in violent retribution. The weather did not cool things down, as a heat wave pushed temperatures to 98 degrees Fahrenheit with high humidity adding to the general discomfort. Within the converted garage strike headquarters the thermometer climbed to 115, and Cannon's fictional Mike Ryan complained to his "dere emily" that inside the building things were "plenty hot."¹⁴⁰ The stage was set for Bloody Friday.¹⁴¹

Unlike in May, the blood spilled in the July days of Minneapolis class conflict would largely be that of union men. Around 2 PM on Friday, 20 July 1934, Local 574's "intelligence forces" predicted that there would soon be an attempt to move produce by truck from a wholesaler in the Market District. This was confirmed by National Guard Commander, General Ellard Walsh. He notified strike leaders that well-armed police were preparing a truck movement. Extra pickets were dispatched from strike headquarters, bringing the total of Local 574 supporters in the Market District to 5000. With the otherworldly Third Period Communist Party ostensibly clamoring to take over the Court House rather than oppose truck movements, a foot patrol of 50 armed police arrived at the loading dock, outfitted with revolvers, clubs, sawed-off shotguns, and riot weapons. Soon a scab truck pulled up, its license plates removed, all identifying markings painted over, and its windows covered in wire mesh. Accompanying it were 100 more police in squad cars, gun barrels protruding from the windows like "quills on a porcupine." After a few small cartons were loaded on to the truck, the police formed a gauntlet through which it could drive, the crowd of pickets jeering menacingly. The rig inched away from the platform and proceeded slowly up the street, where it was rammed/blocked by an open-bed picket truck, with a dozen strikers aboard. As soon as the scab truck was stopped, its large police guard immediately – and apparently without warning – opened fire. As strikers fell wounded, others rushing to their aid were also shot by the cops. It was, by all reliable accounts, little more than a massacre, and was reported as such in the first newspaper accounts of the carnage.

A subsequent red-baiting article in the *Minneapolis Journal* described one of the wounded pickets as a youthful, unemployed dupe of Local 574's "communist leadership." But even this account gave a more or less accurate sense of the

140 "22 Armed Cars in convoy for Two Loads of Food," and "Heat Kills 62 in Nation, 3 in State," *Minneapolis Journal*, 20 July 1934; Le Sueur, "What Happens in a Strike," 330, 332; Tselos, "The Labor Movement in Minneapolis in the 1930s," 241; "letters to dere emily," *The Organizer*, 20 July 1934.

141 An excellent documentary film with much useful material on the Minneapolis strikes of 1934 contains a first-hand account of Bloody Friday's events by Shaun [Jack] Maloney. See John DeGraf, "Labor's Turning Point: The Minneapolis Truck Strikes of 1934," Minneapolis: Labor Education Service, University of Minnesota, 1980.

bloodbath in the market *mêlée*. David Eugene Crocker of St. Paul, Minnesota, prodded by police as he recuperated from his wounds in the hospital, acknowledged that he had been dispatched to the market from strike headquarters. He was one of the men aboard the union truck blocking the path of the police-escorted delivery vehicle:

[F]inally we saw a truck moving over there and one of our squad cars came and they told us we should drive into the driveway and wait until the truck comes out. We waited there a while and after a while the truck started out and we came out and drove up in front of them and smashed them but didn't do much damage. Q-You smashed the truck? A-No; he smashed into us, but didn't do much damage; but then the cops – two or three of them – fired into us. They didn't have any reason at all, to my knowledge. Several men got hurt. I jumped off and the policeman told me to go up on the curb; then without warning one of the policemen took a long shotgun and shot me in the legs, and after that they told us to move along. I started to move along and started to run; and there was quite a few guys firing all over there; and we started to move along, and a policeman turned around and fired on us and he hit me in the arm and hit quite a few other guys. ... Q-You were in the battle when they were beating the police officer? When the trucks came together, weren't you in that mob? A-I got in the mob, but I ran around the truck. ... I didn't see whether a policeman was beaten up.

Returning to strike headquarters with the aid of a union car, Crocker's wounds were attended to and he spent the night there, later being transferred to a hospital.

Picket captain and Local 574 Executive Committee member, Harry DeBoer, remembered the ambush-like nature of what happened:

They started to move the truck and that's when they fired first; they just fired point blank. They just went wild. Actually they shot at anybody that moved. ... There were several pickets in the truck and they all got shot. ... There were even shots coming from the second and third story windows in the warehouse. They really loaded the whole area up with police and guns and whoever was in the warehouse upstairs, we don't know if they were police or what, but the bullets came from all over. It really was organized. ... [T]here were at least five thousand to six thousand pickets there by the time they started shooting. You can visualize almost a whole block of pickets. So they shot at random, anywhere; anywhere there was a worker moving they shot. They just didn't shoot at the truck and then

quit, they kept on shooting until all the pickets had either hid or got shelter somewhere. Oh, they meant business.

Subsequent press coverage was full of rationalization and misinformation, but an official inquiry into the events of Bloody Friday later established unequivocally that, "Police took direct aim at the pickets and fired to kill; physical safety of police was at no time endangered; no weapons were in the possession of pickets in the truck; at no time did pickets attack the police, and it was obvious that pickets came unprepared for such an attack; the truck movement in question was not a serious attempt to move merchandise, but a 'plant' arranged by the police."

Meridel Le Sueur's account is more gruesomely lyrical:

The truck drew up at the warehouse, was loaded, began slowly to move surrounded by police, by pointed shot guns. The picket truck moved forward to stop it, jammed into the truck and the picketers swarmed off; but instantly stopping them in mid-movement, the cops opened fire, splaying them with their own truck. The swarm broke, cut into, whirled up, eddied, fell down soundlessly. The eyes closed as in sleep, and when they opened men were lying crying in the street with blood spurting from the myriad wounds buckshots make. Turning instinctively for cover they were shot in the back. And into that continued fire flowed the next line of pickets to pick up their wounded. They flowed directly into that buckshot fire, inevitably, without hesitation as one wave follows another. And the cops let them have it as they picked up their wounded. Lines of living, solid men, fell, broke, wavering, flinging up, breaking over with the curious and awful abandon of despairing gestures, a man stepping on his own intestines bright, bursting in the street, another holding his severed arm in his other hand. ... Standing on the sidewalk, no one could believe that they were seeing this. Until they themselves were hit by bullets. ... The wounded were arrested for being shot. They were searched. Not a picket was armed with so much as a toothpick.

A block away, where a crowd of union-supporting workers was fired into by police, four pickets were wounded. According to a report written in *The Militant*, and likely authored by Cannon, these battles, while short-lived, saw unarmed workers restrain the police in hand-to-hand combat that saved lives by limiting the cops' capacity to utilize their firearms in the close quarters of physical confrontation. Two police were sent to the hospital as a result of this skirmishing, which saw one sergeant suffer a beating and a patrolman shot in

the leg, a victim of the ricocheting buckshot of chaotic “friendly fire.” But it was an unequal battle and the blood spilled that day was overwhelmingly that of Minneapolis workers.

Eric Severeid was deeply shaken by what he witnessed on Bloody Friday. In search of a story for the *Minneapolis Star*, Severeid visited a city hospital. What he saw there and the conversations he engaged in shocked him. He referred to the police setting “a deliberate trap,” and recalled that while one policeman had been hurt, the nurses explained to him that “nearly all the injured strikers had wounds in the backs of their heads, arms, legs, and shoulders: they had been shot while trying to run out of the ambush.” To Severeid, it smacked of Fascism, and he went home “as close to becoming a practicing revolutionary as one of my noncombative instincts could ever get.”¹⁴²

After Bloody Friday’s police fusillade against the unarmed pickets, four truckloads of National Guardsmen, carrying bayoneted rifles, sub-machine guns, and bomb guns, arrived in the Market District from the armory. Trucks mounted with machine guns patrolled the streets. Thirty minutes later the area was cleared of pickets and the ostensibly “food laden” truck, blocked by the picket vehicle, made a rushed exit. Olson threatened to declare martial law if there was any further escalation of violence.¹⁴³

Bloody Friday lasted a matter of minutes. But its meaning would be stitched into the social fabric of Minneapolis socio-economic relations in indelible class outrage. The brief events of 20 July 1934 polarized class alignments in the city, proving beyond a doubt that “a class battle did exist. ... it made Minneapolis people take sides either actively or in their hearts.” Eric Severeid’s father, an advocate of an almost religiously-sanctified sense of “public order,” was deeply

142 The above paragraphs draw on Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 126–127; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 147–150, with DeBoer quoted on 171, 178; Walker, *American City*, 166–169; Walker, “Minneapolis: City of Tensions, II,” *Survey Graphic* (November 1936), 620–623, 633–634; “50 Wounded in Riot Still in Hospitals,” and “Mediator Given Secret Call from National Capital,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 21 July 1934; “Few of Pickets Wounded in Riot Are Union Drivers, Police Learn,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 22 July 1934; “Victims of the Murders” and “Victim Denounces Police Lies,” *The Organizer*, 21 July 1934; Le Sueur, “What Happens in a Strike,” 333–334; Maloney interview with Duffy and Miller, 16 August 1979, Typescript, 26–32; 23 August 1979, Typescript, 2–16, in File: “Minneapolis Teamsters Strike 1934,” Box 2, Maloney Papers, MNHS; Solow, “War in Minneapolis,” 160; Eric Severeid, *Not So Wild a Dream* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 58–59; “Cops Fire on Unarmed Pickets,” *The Militant*, 21 July 1934. See also, A. Picket, “The Minneapolis Massacre: An Eye Witness Account of Bloody Friday,” *The Organizer*, 24 July 1934; Jerry Kotz, “Minneapolis Sidelights – by an Eye-Witness,” *The Militant*, 4 August 1934.

143 Le Sueur, “What Happens in a Strike,” 334; *New York Times*, 21 July 1934; “Cops Fire on Unarmed Pickets,” *The Militant*, 21 July 1934.

shaken as he read the newspaper headlines and heard his son mouth support for an insurgent working class. "This – this is – *revolution!*" he stuttered in pale-faced disbelief. Citizens' Alliance employers and the civic and commercial clubmen of Minneapolis had a like reaction, defending the police. They deplored the weak-kneed initiatives of the Farmer-Labor state governor, Floyd B. Olson; the Roosevelt Administration and its Regional Labor Board apparatus of appeasement; and the progressive rhetoric of mediators like Dunnigan and Haas. These anti-union forces were unapologetic in their praise of "Bloody Mike" Johannes, and demanded no concessions or "compromise with Communist propagandists or agitators." They believed the only way to get a "permanent settlement" was to crush Local 574 and considered that blood shed in this cause was necessary. After interviewing a number of these pillars of the community, Walker reported: "If one believes passionately that unionism is a blight to an American city, it is romantic to count the cost of human life in annihilating it; and besides, the Citizen's Alliance correctly sensed that this was no ordinary strike and no ordinary trade union. Under the pothor about a soviet in Minneapolis and Red Revolution there was a good grain of class sense. It was a strike and a union which promised to actually change the lives of tens of thousands of persons in Minneapolis, to the employers' detriment."¹⁴⁴

At strike headquarters the mood was somber. Many of the wounded retreated there to be tended by sympathetic volunteers, transported to safety by makeshift union ambulances. All told, some 47 injured pickets and bystanders lay on the improvised cots of Local 574's garage "hospital." Dr. McCrimmon, the strike's "chief surgeon," was soon joined by two other volunteer physicians; 25 registered nurses reported for duty upon hearing what happened, dedicated to alleviating the suffering of strikers and their supporters. Many injured workers avoided the hospitals, rightly fearing arrest, but some found their way to municipal institutions, where Women's Auxiliary members made the rounds, assisting the wounded and trying to cheer up those confined to emergency room beds. Hundreds lined up outside hospitals in case their blood was needed for transfusions. It is impossible to establish with certainty the numbers of Local 574 members and supporters who succumbed to the police fire on 20 July 1934, but at a minimum it included at least 67 men, of whom a dozen or so were almost certainly bystanders gathered in the Market District to witness strike developments.

One of the seriously wounded was Local 574 militant, Harry DeBoer. A bullet in his leg, DeBoer crawled under a loading dock until he cajoled a youth passing

144 Walker, *American City*, 171–173; Severeid, *Not So Wild a Dream*, 58–59.

by to call strike headquarters and have him picked up. When he arrived at the union hospital, DeBoer initially insisted that others more seriously injured be treated before him. The damage to DeBoer's leg was serious enough that he was eventually transported to a local hospital where he was placed under the watch of a National Guardsman. DeBoer almost lost the leg, but managed after a series of operations to survive intact, his leg bone secured with wire and steel pins, the healing process involving six months of traction and three months of casting. Over the course of his convalescence, DeBoer, not known as much of a "reading man" at the time, pored over the pages of Marx's *Capital*. Oscar Coover, Sr., a CLA member, brought the injured striker the book as a gift and, like other Left Oppositionists, visited DeBoer in the hospital and talked politics. With guards outside of his recovery room, ensuring that he could not escape, DeBoer was converted to Trotskyism and joined the revolutionary movement.

Not all of the wounded recovered in this way, but many faced the recriminations and reprisals of the state. At least sixteen pickets and strike supporters, many of them suffering gunshot wounds that were treated at various city hospitals, found themselves charged with criminal offences, including "failing to move for an officer" or "disorderly conduct." They ranged in age from 19 year-old student and Eric Sevaried friend, the "Rabelaisian" Dick Scammon, to unemployed and union men barely out of their teens or as old as fifty. None of the criminal charges stuck in court. Amidst the bloody chaos of the immediate aftermath of the mass shootings, strike headquarters was tense with talk of retribution and gasps of "Murder!" Angry strikers drove all police from the vicinity of the strike headquarters and pickets assumed the responsibility of directing the increasingly heavy traffic into and out of the building. Thirty-five structural iron workers, armed with lengths of lead pipe, came to the converted garage determined to defend it against attack. Hundreds of other workers pledged to spend the night with the strike leaders and the wounded, committed to stand guard against any assault. As people from various walks of life came to the headquarters with cookies, fruit, and reading material for the wounded, militant workers talked of arming themselves and settling scores. *The Organizer*, its headlines screaming "Workers Bloodshed," denounced the police in bold print, "Johannes The Butcher Uses Shotguns to Mow Down 48 Unarmed Workingmen." Attacking the police as "the Uniformed Protectors of Profits," the strike bulletin deplored the provocation of Friday, 20 July 1934, as nothing less than "A cunningly conceived, diabolically planned and cold-bloodedly executed massacre." Women's Auxiliary member, Maud Carlson, penned a tribute to "Our Union": "574 with brave defiance/Threw the ire at the Citizens alliance,/They even put Tobin on the mat,/These brave boys can go to bat." Reporting that 1000 unemployed had registered to fight for Local 574, the increas-

ingly popular workers' daily challenged the purchased press's propaganda that Minneapolis streets had been taken over by communists, with the rhetorical query, "How Do You Like Having Our Minneapolis Streets in Control of Murderers."¹⁴⁵

In order to divert attention from the police randomly shooting dozens of unarmed workers, various apologists began alleging that the strike leaders behaved irresponsibly in resisting police strikebreaking. Subsequent commentators, from Olson biographer George H. Mayer to Irving Bernstein, have taken this "blame the victim" approach a step further. They suggest that Local 574's Trotskyist strategists "deliberately sought the shedding of blood to reinforce working-class solidarity." Bernstein implies that the Dunne brothers, Skoglund, and others, like Cannon behind the scenes, wanted "slain martyrs," explaining this with an ideological assertion that, "The Marxist doctrine of class war, with its inversion of ordinary means and ends, presumably justified in their minds the decision to send unsuspecting pickets into the rain of police gunfire." There is, however, no evidence that this was the case. DeBoer offers a far more plausible explanation for the leadership's thinking. "Before the police had night sticks. This was the first time we encountered the police shooting. The time we were going over the deputy run, then they used night sticks. They probably had guns, but they didn't have instructions to shoot just then. ... Naturally we didn't expect them to shoot like that, right at you, not even a chance, no warning at all." Dobbs, in a roundabout way, concurred. He noted that since the police were now armed with riot guns, it would have been foolhardy to arm pickets with clubs, as had been done in the May 1934 Battle of Deputies Run: "We knew we couldn't challenge the riot guns, and it was our intention to conduct a peaceful mass protest against the anticipated strikebreaking move." Dobbs's retrospective comment claiming that the union leadership was committed to confronting strikebreaking with non-violence may seem inconsistent with the fighting traditions of Local 574, but his expectation that police would not shoot unarmed workers without provocation or any warning seems reasonable enough. Right up to the morning of Bloody Friday, discussions between

145 The above paragraphs draw on Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 127–130; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 150–151, 175–178; Le Sueur, "What Happens in a Strike," 334; Maloney interviewed by Duffy and Miller, 23 August 1979, Transcript, 2–16, File: "Minneapolis Teamster Strike 1934," Box 2, Maloney Papers, MNHS; "50 Wounded in Riot Still in Hospitals," *Minneapolis Journal*, 21 July 1934; Severeid, *Not So Wild A Dream*, 57–58; "Victims of the Murderers," and "Workers Bloodshed: Johannes The Butcher Uses Shotguns to Mow Down 48 Unarmed Workingmen," *The Organizer*, 21 July 1934; Walker, "Civil War in July (Chapter 10)," Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS.

police and union representatives aimed at reducing the prospect of unnecessary clashes and violence, lending credence to the view that the leadership of Local 574 could not have anticipated what would happen in the Market District on Bloody Friday.¹⁴⁶

The Minneapolis working class had no doubt about who was to blame. The evening following the carnage, an open-air protest was organized by the unions to denounce the police and their seeming Citizens' Alliance masters. According to *The Organizer*, the "tempestuous" gathering was attended by "Workers of every craft, thousands of unorganized and unemployed, women as well as men, people of every nationality and many political faiths, bound in a mighty block to curse the names of their exploiters who have shed the blood of innocent strikers" Estimates of the crowd size varied from the union's claim of 15,000, to the *Minneapolis Journal's* understated suggestion of 5,000. Chaired by Central Labor Union [CLU] figurehead and *Minnesota Labor Review* editor, Bob Cramer, the large crowd heard fiery talks from Local 574 President Bill Brown, the three Dunne brothers, Farrell Dobbs, and most of the city's other trade union leaders, as well as remarks from representatives of farmers' and grocers' organizations. The Mayor and Chief of Police came in for a particular dressing down, denounced as "would-be Hitlers."

Having stormed Mayor Bainbridge's office immediately following the afternoon police shooting spree, the CLU wanted to dismiss Johannes and impeach Bainbridge. A petition, circulated by local fraternal societies, unions, veterans' groups, and the Farmer-Labor Party, soon carried 20,000 signatures and many more later endorsed sanctions against the two prominent civic figures. Calling for a thorough-going tie-up of all transport in Minneapolis and a Saturday protest of the events of Bloody Friday, Local 574 nonetheless was not yet advocating "a general strike at this time." Brown hinted, however, that it could well be necessary to pull out all the stops at some future date, for the Minneapolis truckers were fighting for basic trade union principles: if they were defeated the entire labor movement would suffer a death blow. "You thought you would shoot Local 574 into oblivion," declared a defiant *Organizer* editorial, "but you only succeeded in making 574 a battle cry on the lips of every self-respecting working man and woman in Minneapolis."

146 See Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 242; Mayer, *Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 209–210; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 243; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, quoting DeBoer, 176; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 126; Maloney interviewed by Duffy and Miller, 16 August 1979, Transcript, 19–21, in File "Minneapolis Teamsters Strike, 1934," Box 2, Maloney Papers, MNHS.

Conservatives in the labor movement did their best to contain the widening mobilization of workers associated with the insurgent truckers. American Federation of Labor President, William Green, for instance, pressured Laundry and Dry Cleaning workers not to walk off the job in sympathy with the General Drivers' Union. Dan Tobin leaned on the Minneapolis milk drivers and other transport workers, cautioning them against full-fledged job actions of sympathetic protest. All of this helped to defeat a 25 July 1934 Central Labor Union motion favoring a massive one-day strike in support of Local 574. The death of one of the victims of Bloody Friday, however, brought workers by the thousands into Minneapolis streets.¹⁴⁷

18 Labor's Martyr: Henry B. Ness

There were five critical injuries on Bloody Friday: Henry B. Ness; John Belor; Nels Nelson; Otto Lindahl; and Ole Shugren. Ness and Belor were among the first casualties brought to strike headquarters. The latter was unconscious, but Ness, his shirt cut away to reveal a badly disfigured torso, suffered visibly before collapsing and being rushed to St. Barnabas hospital where, despite a series of blood transfusions, he died. The *Minneapolis Journal* of Monday, 23 July 1934, attributed his demise to "the attack on the police convoyed truck." The tragedy could well be interpreted differently. The decoy truck was intended to lure Local 574 strikers and supporters into a confrontation with heavily-armed cops itching for a bloody confrontation. Ness was shot, point-blank range, in the chest. Staggering from the blow, he turned to flee, and was blasted with more buckshot in his back. The doctors removed 38 shotgun pellets from his body. When Ness died less than two days later, his death bed injunction was repeated by

147 The above paragraphs draw on "15,000 Workers at Mass Meeting Condemn Johannes," and "Workers Bloodshed: Johannes The Butcher Uses Shotguns to Mow Down 48 Unarmed Workingmen," *The Organizer*, 21 July 1934; "Workers Blood is Shed," *The Militant*, 28 July 1934; "Mediator Given Secret Call from National Capital," *Minneapolis Journal*, 21 July 1934; "Green Warns Sympathetic Strike Illegal," *Minneapolis Journal*, 24 July 1934; Walker, *American City*, 174; Tselos, "The Labor Movement in Minneapolis in the 1930s," 243–246; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 134. On impeachment proceedings, see the photograph "Sentries posted an entrance to Council Chamber," which shows the Public Welfare Council beginning its deliberations relating to possible charges to be brought against Mayor Bainbridge, available at Minnesota Historical Society, Photographs/Collections On-line, 10729345; Maloney interviewed by Duffy and Miller, 23 August 1979, Transcript, 14, File: "Minneapolis Teamsters Strike 1934," Box 2, Maloney Papers, MNHS claims that the petition to oust Bainbridge secured 100,000 signatures, but this may be an exaggeration.

word-of-mouth among the strikers: "Tell the boys not to fail me now." The union erected a temporary monument at the street corner where he was shot, with a flag at half-mast.

A 49-year old father of four young children, Ness was a World War I veteran, a friend of Bill Brown, and had been a union member for sixteen years. He was among the first arrested in the July strike and was fined \$10 for disorderly conduct in connection with an altercation on 17 July 1934.

Local 574 organized a massive funeral for Ness. His body lay in state for two days prior to a private family service on Tuesday, 24 July 1934. That was followed by a mass march of 20,000 to strike headquarters, where Bill Brown attempted to speak, but broke down in tears. CLA-member and Local 574 lawyer, Albert Goldman, offered an eloquent eulogy to Ness, drawing on the striker's dying words: "Brothers, Sisters, as we leave this demonstration we must bear in our hearts a fierce resolve to carry on Brother Ness's struggle. We must not fail him! We must avenge his murder. This we shall do if we struggle to win this strike, if we struggle to throw the exploiters from off our backs and to establish a new social order in which the worker may enjoy the fruits of his toil." As Ness's slow-moving hearse left strike headquarters, which was flying a black flag of mourning, thousands of people lined the streets to salute the fallen militant, while thousands more joined the procession to the cemetery. A plane flew overhead. The burial was conducted with full military honors. Marvel Scholl of the Women's Auxiliary helped outfit Ness's destitute widow and children for the funeral.

More than 40,000 men, women, and children paid their respects to Ness, hailed as the martyr of the struggling General Drivers' Union. Minneapolis trade unionists came out in force, as did the unemployed. It proved impossible to tally the total number of strike sympathizers who participated in the funeral procession, gathered to hear the eulogies at strike headquarters, lined the streets of the cortege in mourning, or made the miles-long trek to the grave site. Labor movement sources estimated that between fifty and one hundred thousand people participated in the day's sad events. All traffic was brought to a standstill during the proceedings, but not a cop could be seen along the funeral route. Union marshals directed the somber flow of automobiles, trucks, and marchers.

Charles Rumford Walker observed that, "The workers of Minneapolis display a certain genius for public demonstrations. In the funeral of Henry Ness they outdid themselves in drama and solemnity." Cannon described the Ness funeral in a "dere emily" column:

kid, ya should a seen Harry Ness' funeral yesterday. 40,000 or so people took part. It was the biggest funeral every held in this part of the country.

at 3 o'clock the procession began to leave the undertakers. first comes the casket with the color guard. then our officers from 574. then some vets. then come us, about 5000 members of 574, marchin along, not saying a word. ... after us comes about 500 womin auxiliary members, then comes lots of unions, and about 7,000 of these M.C.C.W.ers. and behind all of us marchers was thousands of cars. we stopped up traffic for an hour and a half.

"So magnificent and startling a demonstration has not been seen in Minneapolis in years," concluded an account in *The Organizer*, reprinted in *The Militant*.¹⁴⁸

The death of Henry B. Ness cast a pall over strike-torn Minneapolis. Mediators Haas and Dunnigan and Governor Olson clearly feared a violent backlash. Police Chief Johannes was unrepentant and as Ness was buried stationed a corps of armed police in the municipal court house, which was fortified with machine guns. The trucking bosses, through their Committee, were adamant that their right to move goods throughout the city was inviolable. Local 574, for its part, remained committed to maintaining picket lines and shutting down scab trucking.

Haas and Dunnigan attempted to come up with a settlement, while Olson, demanding that the mediators be given a chance to bring events to a peaceful resolution, engaged in almost daily skirmishing with the Mayor, the Police Chief, and Citizens' Alliance/Employers' Advisory Council spokesman, Joseph R. Cochran. The Farmer-Labor Governor hit hard at what he designated a small clique of reactionary Citizens' Alliance employers, whom he held responsible for orders issued to police to shoot down strikers on Bloody Friday. Olson refused to countenance "approval of the shooting of unarmed citizens of Min-

148 The above paragraphs draw on "Speech by William S. Brown," File: "American City Notes: Local 574 and Strike," Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS; Smemo, "The Politics of Labor Militancy in Minneapolis," 36; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 128–134; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 176; Walker, *American City*, 174–176; "100,000 in Tribute to Ness – Protest Johannes Butchery," *Minneapolis Labor Review*, 27 July 1934; "Peace or a Breakup in Sight as Guarded Trucks Move Necessities," *Minneapolis Journal*, 23 July 1934; "The Fight Has Just Begun: The First Martyr of 574," *The Organizer*, 23 July 1934; "Rally Tonight By Workmen's Circle for 574," *The Organizer*, 24 July 1934; "40,000 Attend Ness Funeral," "Ness Has Aviation Escort," "A Pledge to a Martyr: Excerpts from the Funeral Address of Attorney Albert Goldman," and "dere emily," *The Organizer*, 25 July 1934; "574's Attorney Reports on Status of Prisoners," *The Organizer*, 27 July 1934; "40,000 Join Mass Funeral for Harry Ness," and "Goldman's Speech," *The Militant*, 28 July 1934; "Workers Pay Respects to Ness at Public Funeral," *Minneapolis Journal*, 25 July 1934.

neapolis, strikers and bystanders alike, in their backs, in order to carry out the wishes of the Citizen's Alliance." He railed against those who responded to the "plea for a living wage by a family man receiving only \$12 a week" by "calling that man a communist."

At the same time, Olson drafted a martial law declaration should civil order be threatened. Four thousand National Guardsmen, bivouacked at the State Fair Grounds, were readied to be deployed throughout the city. The Citizens' Alliance was unimpressed. EAC chair Cochran criticized Olson for preparing the ground for martial law, arguing that such measures should not be used to enforce a settlement between the employers and the truck drivers when, according to him, barely ten percent of the workforce was affiliated with Local 574. Cochran called on Olson to limit the use of troops to "maintaining law and order," declaring it an "outrage when individuals assume authority by force to say who shall use our streets and who shall not." No advocate of a martial-law imposed settlement of the conflict, Cochran and the Alliance demanded the use of military aid to open the streets and, in effect, break the strike. "A handful of dissatisfied workers, aided and abetted by communists, imported disturbers and local unemployed," Cochran wrote, "are now menacing nearly a half million citizens and jeopardizing the employment of thousands of faithful workers."

Police escorts for scab transport resumed following the Ness funeral. The Trotskyists leading the strike faced pressure from an enraged rank-and-file, many of whom were talking about arming themselves to level the playing field. Dobbs, Skoglund, and the Dunnes, as well as picket captains such as Kelly Postal, Ray Rainbolt, and Shaun [Jack] Maloney, reluctantly disarmed strikers, but continued militant picket lines, urging that peaceful methods be used. Strikers were of course advised to "defend themselves against any attacks," but the General Drivers' Union leadership knew well that if workers escalated an armed struggle it would only precipitate a fresh round of violence and bloodshed, culminating in the defeat of Local 574.

Johannes was sending as many as forty squad cars, packed with armed cops, to convoy a single truck through even larger detachments of cruising pickets. While the strikers did not try to impede the scab traffic, their numbers and persistence made the movement of commercial goods complicated and expensive. An issue of *The Organizer* reported jocularly, "Yesterday at about 9 a.m. the coppers moved a truck containing three wheelbarrows and a tool box. Sixteen squad cars were needed. The job cost about \$1.00. The protection cost the taxpayer about \$200.00." Trucks were on the road, but it was not business as usual.

The Minneapolis Central Council of Workers, in which CLA members were active and connections to Local 574 formally established, swelled as "make-

work" Emergency Relief Administration [ERA] projects were struck by 5,000 jobless. They demanded trade-union rates of pay and the thirty-hour work week, coordinating their efforts with the General Drivers' Union. Women's Auxiliary membership was also growing. New recruits joined the ranks of those supporting the strike and selling *The Organizer*. Charles Rumford Walker concluded, "The strike was coming alive."¹⁴⁹

On Wednesday, 25 July 1934, Haas-Dunnigan unveiled a proposal to end the Minneapolis conflict. It involved concessions from the employers on a number of essential issues demanded by Local 574, including minimum wage rates and the definition of "inside workers." The issue of which workers the General Drivers' Union had the right to represent would be left up to a vote conducted by the Regional Labor Board, which placated the trucking bosses somewhat. The tentative settlement also included a provision that all workers were to be reinstated, but other clauses stipulated that negotiations on a number of issues be postponed until disputes over representation were ironed out at the Board. In a clear victory for the union the Haas-Dunnigan plan stated that drivers' wages, yet to be determined, could not be arbitrated below 52.5 cents an hour, while other workers were to receive minimum hourly compensation of 42.5 cents. This controversial provision, opposed by Lloyd Garrison of the National Labor Relations Board in Washington, was included at Governor Olson's insistence. If the principals could ultimately not reach a final agreement, a five-person arbitration panel would set wages and determine other issues. After some back-and-forth parleys, the strike leadership offered its acceptance, and with the *Minneapolis Journal* at first reporting Local 574's rejection, the General Drivers' Union voted overwhelmingly (1866 to 147) to accept the settlement terms laid down by Haas and Dunnigan and bring the strike to a close.

Olson threw his weight behind the mounting pressure to end the strike by declaring that if the Haas-Dunnigan plan was rejected, martial law would be proclaimed. Trucks would move only with special military permits, ending the practice of armed police escorting strikebreaking convoys through picket lines. Neither Local 574 nor the EAC wanted martial law declared, but Olson's willingness to toss the dice of military governance into the mix of the embattled

149 The above paragraphs draw on Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 132–138; "Few of Pickets Wounded in Riot Are Union Drivers, Police Learn," and "Official Statements on Strike Riot Controversy," *Minneapolis Journal*, 22 July 1934; "Peace or a Breakup in Sight as Guarded Trucks Move Necessities," *Minneapolis Journal*, 23 July 1934; "Martial Law Decision Waits Action on Mediation Plan," *Minneapolis Journal*, 24 July 1934; "Military Aid to Civil Officers Seen," *Minneapolis Journal*, 25 July 1934; "Governor's Statement," and "Employers Letter to Governor," *Minneapolis Journal*, 26 July 1934; *The Organizer*, 25 July 1934; Walker, *American City*, 173.

Minneapolis class forces of July 1934 was a bold gamble destined to fail in its attempt to bring the strike to a mediated end.¹⁵⁰

The Citizens' Alliance and the Employers' Advisory Committee flatly rejected the proposed settlement. Refusing to rehire the strikers *en masse*, the EAC insisted that any employee "guilty of violence" must be excluded from the back-to-work protocols. The trucking bosses also objected vehemently to the proposed minimum wage rates. They argued that, "to fix an increased wage scale by a vicious strike, and then arbitrate from that point upwards, only paves the way for a repetition of the same lawlessness a few weeks or months hence, which would plunge our city into new turmoil, if the demands of ... agitators were not complied with." Quibbles about election procedures and the selection of the Arbitration Board's Chair only confirmed that the Citizens' Alliance and the employers were determined to fight on. No strike settlement was going to be accepted that did not repudiate the General Drivers' Union and its leadership, which was assailed for its use of "rioting and disorder," for utilizing strikes premised on "false statements and misrepresentations by communistic leaders":

Under the circumstances we cannot deal with this communistic leadership; as it represents only a small minority of our employees. It does not represent the principles of a majority of its eligible membership, nor those of the International Truck Drivers union, as clearly expressed by D.W. Tobin, international president. This whole strike is the result of misrepresentation, coercion, and intimidation. The strike is being manned by pickets drawn from the ranks of local and imported communists, and local unemployed, who have been given paid-up membership cards in the union, and who do not, in any way, represent the real truck drivers of Minneapolis.

Olson issued an acrimonious public rejoinder. The Governor placed responsibility for scuttling the settlement squarely on the shoulders of the "small clique" at the helm of the Citizens' Alliance. Consumed by their "hate" for "organized labor," these reactionaries were "determined to crush it." Privately, he admonished Cochran and his collaborators to "discover some noun that you

150 The above paragraphs draw on Blatz, "Father Haas and the Minneapolis Truckers' Strike of 1934," 11; "Both Sides Reject Proposals Advanced by Federal Mediator," *Minneapolis Journal*, 25 July 1934; "National Guards Will Move Into City at Once; Strikers Vote Acceptance; Employers Object to Meeting with Reds," *Minneapolis Journal*, 26 July 1934; "No Trucks to be Moved! By Nobody!" *The Organizer*, 26 July 1934; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 145–149.

may use to describe those under-paid workers and perhaps describe me, other than the terms 'Red' and 'Communist'."¹⁵¹

19 Martial Law/Red Scare

At 1 P.M. on 26 July 1934, as most Minneapolis citizens were finishing their lunches, almost 2000 members of Local 574 were leaving the Eagles Hall after a three-hour meeting that voted overwhelmingly to accept the terms of the Hass-Dunningan "peace plan." The impasse continued. Employers objected to almost all of the key provisions of the proposed accord and, tellingly, declared their abhorrence of even "meeting with reds." True to his word, Olson ordered 4,000 National Guardsmen into the streets, declaring martial law later that evening, alleging that "a state of insurrection exist[ed] in the City of Minneapolis and the Country of Hennepin," the populace threatened by "tumult, riots, and mob violence." Civil authorities proved unable to restrain "Bodies of men [that] together by force have attempted to commit felonies and to offer violence to persons and property ... and by force of violence to break and resist the laws of [the] State, imperiling the lives, health, and property and general welfare of the citizens." Olson pledged to make Minneapolis "as quiet as a Sunday School picnic."¹⁵²

Under martial law the only trucks that moved were those licenced by the military. Within a day, thousands were lining up to secure permits for the transportation of milk, ice, fuel, breadstuffs, gasoline and other essentials, which apparently included newspapers. "Officially, Minneapolis is on a bread and milk diet," quipped the *Minneapolis Journal*. The martial law embargo effectively ended police escorts of scab trucks, but it also banned picketing. The union announced that it would comply with Olson's edict, although there were still occasional reports of striking workers blocking traffic. National Guard commander, Brigadier General Ellard A. Walsh, had his forces out on the thoroughfares, monitoring all truck movement. Walsh warned trade unionists that defiance of the ban on picketing would result in "a trip to the military stockade."

¹⁵¹ The above paragraphs draw on Walker, *American City*, 176–180; Tselos, "The Labor Movement in Minneapolis in the 1930s," 246–248; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 151–153; "Employers' Reply," and "Governor's Statement," *Minneapolis Journal*, 26 July 1934. There is much raw material on Olson's predicament and his resulting oscillations in Files: "Farmer-Labor Party (Ch. 10)," and "American City (Ch. 5): Olson's Order to Haycroft 1934," Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS.

¹⁵² Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 153–154; "The Duty of the Hour: Obey Orders," *Minneapolis Journal*, 27 July 1934.

Businesses were free to operate, but theatres, dance-halls, and public amusement places had to be closed between midnight and 8AM. Any outdoor gathering of 100 or more required a permit signed by the troop commander, which put an end to Local 574's practice of holding massive open-air meetings at strike headquarters. Tampering with permits or documents, uttering alarmist reports, or carrying arms of any kind were prohibited, as was "the indiscriminate operation of commercial trucks," an act judged unusually likely to "cause violence and precipitate riot." The Minneapolis Church Federation decided that this militarization of civil society provided a teachable moment and ran a newspaper ad in which higher authority was invoked as the foundation of all true justice: "The will of God, accepted with the same docility as martial law, will turn any people from jungle paths to summits of vision, understanding and peace. It will develop the 'Kingship of Self-Control' which is the foundation of all law, and order, and civilization worthy of the name." Above the material fray of capital vs. labor, the Church Federation invited "all classes to seek God's will and do it."¹⁵³

The Citizens' Alliance was not a faith-based organization, but its anti-communist crusade was conducted with fire and brimstone.¹⁵⁴ Charles Rumford Walker's research notes contain reports of Johannes telling a gathering of businessmen that, "the strike had been financed by Communists," promising that a repeat of the events of May would not be tolerated. "We'll run ... bayonets up the rumps of these red agitators and then pull the triggers," boasted the Chief to considerable applause. Aware of the depth of discontent within the working class, which was still "dominated in important respects by bourgeois ideas, aspirations, and loyalty," Walker, like the Minneapolis Trotskyists, recognized that "politically conscious proletarians" did not dominate the ranks of Local 574. Most laboring people, Walker concluded, embraced misconceptions about communism, including that it was an "un-American" doctrine usually associated with foreigners, especially Russians and Jews; that it was dictatorial and involved wanton bloodshed, destruction, and social chaos. "Of the vast masses,"

¹⁵³ "Military Rule Ordered: Extra – National Guards Will Move into City at Once," *Minneapolis Journal*, 26 July 1934; "On Bread and Milk Diet, Troops Patrol Streets, Seize Reds," *Minneapolis Journal*, 27 July 1934; "Military Regulations Governing Minnesota," and "Martial Law vs. The Will of God," *Minneapolis Journal*, 28 July 1934; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 149.

¹⁵⁴ For a later, October 1934, statement on the strikes that revealed the intensity of the Employers' Advisory Committee's anti-communism, see Joseph R. Cochran, "The Truth About the Truck Driver's Strikes," Typescript, 19 pages, 20 October 1934, in File: "American City: Employers Side," Box 1 CRW Papers, MNHS. This document concluded by expressing the belief that "every employer in the state of Minnesota" would support "opposition to Communist domination of business and industry."

Walker's notes declared, "those not consciously opposed to the notion of a collective society are so ignorant of the meaning of revolution as to be unprepared for the polemics of the counter-revolutionary."

With the "average worker" largely oblivious to "the distinction between a revolutionary and a Stalinist," Walker appreciated that Red Scares could be used effectively "by the capitalists and their labor lieutenants to break up workers' struggles." In Minneapolis, anti-communism was an essential element in the capitalist counter-attack of 1934: "The bosses use a Red Scare much as armies use a gas attack. Under its poisonous cover they launch the attack proper; hoping that the poison will have incapacitated the workers' vanguard, they plan to sweep forward and force the surrender of the main body." Yet the red-baiting in Minneapolis had little effect on rank-and-file teamsters and their supporters. Walker concluded that the strike leaders were remarkably successful in neutralizing anti-communist attacks, and that their "methods and their success contrasts vividly with those of any other strike leadership during the present phase of American labor struggles." If the capitalist *coup de grace* of the Red Scare largely failed to achieve its desired effect in Minneapolis during the summer of 1934, it was certainly not for want of effort.¹⁵⁵

Headlines in the *Minneapolis Journal* on 26 July 1934 announcing the declaration of martial law were accompanied by sensational claims that "Raid Reveals Communists Run Strike from New York Offices" and "N.Y. Communists Direct Local Strike Through Vincent Dunne." From the moment that Minneapolis was threatened with military rule, it was rumored that "military intelligence agents were reported ... doing 'undercover' work to learn about the reported activity of communists in the strike." The immediate targets were Jim Cannon and Max Shachtman, who were in Minneapolis making themselves useful by advising the strike committee and putting out *The Organizer*. The two leading CLA members kept a low profile during the strike, but were nonetheless followed by detectives. Cannon thought Shachtman's flamboyant taste in headgear – "a great big ten-gallon cowboy hat" – made them a conspicuous target when they left strike headquarters on the night of 25 July 1934. At about ten o'clock in the evening the two were taken into police custody. Wandering down Hennepin Avenue in search of entertainment, they took a moment choosing between a burlesque show at one venue and a movie theatre next door. They opted for

¹⁵⁵ Johannes quote from Lou Gord, "Minnesota Offers a President, Olson After Roosevelt, America Watches Minnesota," Typescript in File: "Three Men and the Destiny of a City (Ch. 11)," and Red-Scare quotes from Untitled Typescript, 1–2, File: "American City: Incomplete Notes and Articles," Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS. See also Eric Thane, "The 'Red Menace' in Minnesota," *The Nation*, 17 October 1934, 435–436.

the cinema and, as Cannon later recounted, a good thing it was. "What a narrow escape from being arrested in a burlesque show. What a scandal it would have been. I would never have lived it down, I am sure."¹⁵⁶

The next day the Minneapolis papers were breathlessly recounting a police "raid in which they took two communist workers from New York into custody." Cannon and Shachtman were identified as the arrested duo, the press reveling in reports of a "loaded pistol found in the baggage of one of the communists." The hotel rooms of "the agitators" yielded "incriminating" bundles of *The Militant*, telegrams, and correspondence, in which Cannon, Vincent Ray Dunne, and Swabeck discussed the nature of the Minneapolis strike and its significance. "The correspondence showed the country is dotted with communist agents and agitators and that they fomented trouble in the San Francisco strike," intoned the *Minneapolis Journal*. "Having been defeated on the west coast by the prompt action of citizen vigilantes, they pinned their hopes for revolution on the Minneapolis strike." Herbert Solow observed in the *New Leader* that the arrest of Cannon and Shachtman marked a new stage in the intensifying struggle in Minneapolis: "Press, pulpit, and radio howled for blood." Cannon, Shachtman, and Swabeck were depicted as the communist brains trust directing the events in Minneapolis from afar, with Vincent Ray Dunne as little more than their pliant, local dupe.¹⁵⁷

After being hauled down to police headquarters, Cannon and Shachtman were processed, fingerprinted, and lodged in a city cell. No charges were laid, and repeated inquiries as to what criminal offence they were being held under went unanswered. (Solow reported in *The Nation* that the arrests were for "disorderly conduct by criminal syndicalism," but this was omitted in a later reprinting of the article in *The Organizer*.) The raid on Cannon's and Shacht-

156 "Raid Reveals Communists Run Strike From New York Offices," and "N.Y. Communists Direct Local Strike Through Vincent Dunne," *Minneapolis Journal*, 26 July 1934; "On Bread and Milk Diet, Troops Patrol Streets, Seize Reds," *Minneapolis Journal*, 27 July 1934; "2 Troop Officers Granted Release, Meat Runs Short," *Minneapolis Journal*, 28 July 1934; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 162–163.

157 "Raid Reveals Communists Run Strike from New York Offices," *Minneapolis Journal*, 26 July 1934 and for a complete page-long reproduction of some of the routine correspondence seized see "Patrol Takes 2 Communists from City Jail," *Minneapolis Journal*, 27 July 1934; "Troops Rule Minneapolis: Police Arrest Cannon and Shachtman," *The Militant*, 28 July 1934; Herbert Solow, "The Great Minneapolis Strike," *New Leader*, 8 September 1934. Consistent with the low profile kept by Cannon and Shachtman, note that *The Organizer*, which they edited, largely kept their arrests out of the paper. For a short, rather cryptic note on the arrests, which accents the anti-communist meaning of the Cannon and Shachtman victimization, but avoids naming them, see A 574 Man Since February, "The Worker's Voice," *The Organizer*, 27 July 1934.

man's hotel rooms was conducted by a squad of detectives, who ransacked the men's personal possessions without "the formality of a search warrant." Finding nothing more than a legally-published newspaper, *The Militant*, and sheaves of relatively innocuous correspondence, Shachtman later commented that, "The whole thing was a flop, and didn't even have the groundwork material for a good-sized frame-up."

Interrogated by Detective Ohman and infamous "Bloody Mike" Johannes, Cannon and Shachtman insisted on the right to have their lawyer, Albert Goldman, present, but they were not permitted to contact him. Thirty-six hours after their arrest, Cannon and Shachtman were finally booked on the ludicrous offence of vagrancy (they had hotel rooms and money) and paraded before a judge. Goldman and another Local 574 lawyer were on hand with a writ of *habeas corpus*, demanding their release. Johannes readily agreed, and then promptly handed Cannon and Shachtman over to the National Guard, which placed the two men under military arrest. A Sergeant entered the courtroom armed with a sub-machine gun and marched Cannon and Shachtman outside where, flanked by bayonet-touting guardsmen, they were loaded on to an armed military truck and transported to a make-shift stockade at the State Fairgrounds. As they were being hustled out of the courtroom, Bill Brown shouted down from a third-floor window, "Look out for those bayonets."

The two CLA leaders had the distinction of being the first military prisoners incarcerated under martial law. They could not possibly have violated any of its provisions as they were already in police custody prior to military rule being declared. Awaiting their transit to the guardhouse, Cannon and Shachtman heard their sentinels given orders to "Shoot to kill if they make a move to escape!" They had still not been provided any explanation as to why they were being held. Six hours later and to their surprise, Cannon and Shachtman were informed that they were to be released under a deportation order requiring them to leave Minneapolis. Anxious to get back in touch with strike leaders, the two decided not to "make a test case of our deportation." Rather than challenge their unjust incarceration, they played the system, accepting an offer of release that merely stipulated they were to leave Minneapolis. Cannon and Shachtman simply set up shop in nearby St. Paul, where they resumed consultations with their Trotskyist comrades, Bill Brown, and other General Drivers' Union leaders.

They also sent off a blistering letter of protest to Governor Olson. As journalists associated with the labor press (Cannon was editor of *The Militant*, while Shachtman occupied a like post at the *New International*), they demanded the same rights as out-of-town correspondents from the capitalist press. Olson issued a public statement that, as far as he was concerned, those associated

with the radical *Militant* should have the same freedoms of speech and movement as journalists in the pay of the Tory *Chicago Tribune*. On that basis, Cannon and Shachtman were able to move back into their Minneapolis hotel, resuming their close connection with the Strike Committee. Cannon recalled that, “every night we had meetings of the steering committee as long as any of the leading comrades were out of jail. The steering committee of the strike, sometimes with Bill Brown, sometimes without him, would ... talk over the day’s experiences and plan the next day. There was never a serious move made during the whole strike that was not planned and prepared for in advance.”¹⁵⁸

The failure of the Red Scare to turn public opinion against the union was reflected in the growing memberships of both the Women’s Auxiliary and the Minneapolis Central Council of Workers. These bodies rallied housewives, daughters, and the unemployed to the cause of Local 574 as the strike progressed. At a Parade Grounds rally attended by 15,000 strike supporters on Friday, 27 July 1934, Ray Dunne denounced martial law as state-sanctioned strike breaking, while Albert Goldman warned that the seizure of Cannon and Shachtman was the thin edge of a repressive wedge that might soon extend to include local strike leaders. *The Organizer* hailed the enthusiastic crowd as “a mighty display of determination and solidarity”; workers intended “to fight for [their] rights and interests to the bitter end and against all foes.” *The Militant* observed with satisfaction that, “Despite all provocations, murders, red baiting, and martial law, the strike of drivers still remains as solid as granite, gaining new strength with every new day.” Minnesota’s farmer-labor paper, the Rochester-based *Midwest American*, appealed to Olson to “Call off the Tin Hats.” It found that the “ordering of newspapermen out of town even if they happen to be communists, is getting a bit boresome.”

The Communist League of America organized Sunday-evening protest meetings at Irving Plaza Hall in New York City on 29 July and 5 August 1934, calling attention to the murder of strikers, the arrest of Cannon and Shachtman, and the use of martial law against the Minneapolis truckers. Shachtman, returning east to attend to his duties as editor of the *New International*, addressed the latter gathering. Cannon remained in Minneapolis, where his

¹⁵⁸ The above paragraphs draw on “Patrol Takes 2 Communists From City Jail,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 27 July 1934; “Frame-Up Against League Leaders a Complete Collapse,” *The Militant*, 4 August 1934; Solow, “War in Minneapolis,” *The Nation* (8 August 1934), 160–161, dated Minneapolis, 25 July 1934, and reprinted in *The Organizer*, 4 August 1934; “Deported Editors Return to Minneapolis,” *The Organizer*, 29 July 1934; Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 73–74; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 149–150; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 163–164; “New Strike Peace Proposal Ready; Cruising Pickets Attack Trucks,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 30 July 1934.

“dere emily” column continued to strike a defiant note in the dialect of the dispossessed: “Well kid, here it is eleven days we been on strike now, and me and the boys is just getting into the swing of tings agin. Yesterday the Governor sent in the national guards, and now marshal law is declared. I think that’s a rotten trick, but nottin is going to keep us from winnin this here strike.”¹⁵⁹

Local 574’s insistence that the strike was holding firm was an affirmation of hope against reality. It was increasingly obvious that the National Guard was not really controlling the movement of goods in Minneapolis, restricting truck deliveries to actual necessities. The number of applications for military transit permits increased steadily at the same time as the ranks of National Guardsmen monitoring transport dwindled (over 2,000 were withdrawn only days after the declaration of martial law in what was announced as a cost-saving venture). More and more trucks were on Minneapolis streets moving a variety of products. The General Drivers’ Union ascertained many vehicles went unmonitored, and much of what was being transported did not fit into Governor Olson’s definition of “essentials.”

As the capitalist press complained vociferously about shortages of meat and other staples, the list of recognized “necessities” expanded. On 30 July 1934, “All wholesale meat trucks, hotel and restaurant and sausage trucks started moving” at noon “under military permit.” A ban on the delivery of all dairy products, including ice cream and cheese, was also lifted. With thousands of permits covering an estimated 7,500 trucks, it was clear that martial law was being used to break Local 574’s strike. By 1 August 1934, it was estimated that commercial trucking was operating at 65–70 percent of normal. Angry strikers responded with sporadic attacks on trucks and scabs, with vehicles often vandalized. The more conservative union officials in the Central Labor Union began finding excuses not to appear at events in support of Local 574, causing notable rifts in the labor movement. From the perspective of the Strike Committee of 100, things were moving in the wrong direction.¹⁶⁰

159 “The Talk About Martial Law,” *The Organizer*, 25 July 1934; “Martial Law Declared by Olson,” *The Organizer*, 26 July 1934; “dere emily,” *The Organizer*, 27 July 1934; “The Right to Picket is the Right to Organize!”, “15,000 Rally to Support the Strike Cause,” and “An Attorney’s Views: Remarks of Albert Goldman at the Parade Rally,” *The Organizer*, 28 July 1934; “Local 574 on Martial Law,” and “Troops Rule Minneapolis: Police Arrest Cannon and Shachtman – Drivers Ranks Solid Despite Provocation,” *The Militant*, 28 July 1934; Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 74; Announcement, “Max Shachtman: The Minneapolis Strike: An Eyewitness Account, Sunday August 5 8 PM, Irving Plaza,” *The Militant*, 4 August 1934; “Martial Law a ‘Mistake,’” *Minneapolis Journal*, 9 August 1934.

160 Tselos, “The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s,” 248–249; “2 Troop Officers Granted Release,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 28 July 1934; “New Strike Peace Proposal Ready; Cruising

By this time a Communist League of America-constituted informal strike steering committee composed of Ray Dunne, Skoglund, Dobbs, Al Goldman, and Cannon was exercising considerable influence over strike strategy and the day-to-day activities that sustained the teamster insurgency. Cannon's style could increasingly be discerned in *The Organizer*, whose front-page editorials urged the workers to hang-on and to stay true to their union and its cause.¹⁶¹

To win the strike, Local 574's leadership needed to re-establish control of truck movements, and to this end the union presented Olson with a four-point ultimatum challenging his declaration of martial law. The General Drivers' Union demanded an end to interference with open-air meetings at strike headquarters; recognition of the right to picket peacefully, including the stopping of trucks; the withdrawal of the National Guard from the streets of Minneapolis, with union pickets to monitor permitted vehicles and their movements; and, finally, a 48-hour halt to all trucking in the city, declared as a transition period in which this new regime would be established. When a union delegation met with Olson, Carl Skoglund pointed out that if martial law had not been declared the employers could have been forced to accept the Haas-Dunnigan strike settlement plan. Given the deterioration of the situation under National Guard control, Skoglund insisted that all martial law-issued permits should be withdrawn for two days and thereafter any permits allowed should be granted only on the condition that employers receiving such passes agree to conditions stipulated in the earlier mediators' recommendations, which the General Drivers' Union was on record as accepting. Local 574 was in effect demanding a system of dual power in Minneapolis, with union authority taken to an entirely unprecedented level in a strike situation.¹⁶²

Olson predictably refused the workers' ultimatum, but did promise to tighten up the monitoring of trucking activity and limit the issuance of permits. The press and employers responded by upping the decibel level of their noisy red-baiting campaign. A showdown was set for 1 August 1934, with Local 574 promising a "continuation of the fight." Another Parade Grounds mass rally was

Pickets Attack Trucks," *Minneapolis Journal*, 30 July 1934; "15,000 Rally to Support the Strike Cause," *The Organizer*, 28 July 1934; "Crashes Sedan, Kills Driver – Passenger Near Death; 3 Troopers Also Injured," *Minneapolis Journal*, 31 July 1934 and for another account of the crash, indicating that it had nothing to do with monitoring strike/picket activity, see "574 Man Tells Truth of Crash: Cop Threatens Witness of Auto Accident," *The Organizer*, 1 August 1934.

161 On the 'Party Steering Committee' see Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 176.

162 Skoglund claimed that Olson later made important concessions, including roping off the market, using National Guardsmen to restrict vehicle movements. Skoglund interviewed by Halstead, 25 April 1955, Transcript, 31, Box 2, Riehle Papers, MNHS.

scheduled for the evening of Tuesday 31 July 1934. Twenty-five thousand people showed up to cheer Bill Brown when he declared, "the Farmer-Labor Administration is the best strikebreaking force our union has ever gone up against." Albert Goldman received the longest and loudest applause for his condemnation of Olson's role in undermining the strike while still pretending to be committed to helping working people. "The zero hour is nigh!" thundered the CLA lawyer-agitator, "If we submit without a struggle, then we deserve the fate of submissive slaves. We can not, we dare not, submit. We call upon the workers, organized and unorganized, to clench their fists, shout defiance of the bosses, and struggle until victory or death." It was left to Vincent Ray Dunne to close the meeting with a declaration that the pickets were going back up. "Submit to the governor," he declared emphatically, "and the strike is lost. *The militia is moving trucks.*" In open defiance of martial law, the union summoned all pickets to assemble at strike headquarters at 4 AM on the morning of 1 August 1934. The gloves were off.¹⁶³

Olson opted to get in the first lick, ordering the National Guard to occupy strike headquarters and arrest the leadership of the General Drivers' Union. His justification was that the union lacked a military permit sanctioning its mass meeting the night before and the rally produced a number of statements made "in direct defiance ... of military order." At 3:55 AM, before the first pickets were to be dispatched, 800 troops surrounded Local 574's Eighth Street and Second Avenue strike headquarters, occupied it, and placed a number of union leaders and members under arrest. "The coup," as it was described approvingly in the mainstream press, was carried out under the command of Colonel Elmer McDevitt, and involved 50 huge army trucks, six large-caliber machine-guns, teargas squads, their knapsacks bulging with canisters, and detachments of bayonet-bearing Guardsmen. Inside strike headquarters, troops seized a dozen lead pipes and clubs and a few sharpened icepicks, outfitted with grip-sized wooden handles. About 150 unionists were milling about, awaiting picket instructions, while some Women's Auxiliary members served coffee and prepared toast. Dr. Enright was tending to a few of the victims of Bloody Friday.

163 "... If it Takes All Summer," *The Organizer*, 29 July 1934; "State Troops Are Harming Strike," *The Organizer*, 28 July 1934; "Workers Mass to Back 574," *The Organizer*, 30 July 1934; "Pickets to Report at 4 AM," "574 to Go on Fighting for Right to Live," "We Will Not Submit," and "Bosses Again hiding Behind Red Scare," *The Organizer*, 31 July 1934; "Employers Statement," "Governor's Statement," and "Grocery, Tobacco and Beer Carriers are Given Permits; Men Threaten More Picketing; Employers Refuse to Sell Out City to Communism," *Minneapolis Journal*, 31 July 1934; Walker, *American City*, 183; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 151; "25,000 Pledge Support to 574," and "With Clenched Fists! From Last Night's Address by Albert Goldman," *The Organizer*, 1 August 1934; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 246.

Along with dozens of others, the volunteer physician found himself taken into custody, and hauled down to the stockade. He was subsequently maliciously prosecuted for practicing medicine under ostensibly unsanitary conditions. By offering his services to striking workers, Enright clearly failed to maintain "professional standards."

Most of the Trotskyist leadership of 574 were napping in picket cars parked in the back lot of the headquarters' building when they were awakened with word that "the army" was descending on them. Bill Brown and Miles Dunne, not yet at headquarters, were later taken into military custody and, along with Ray Dunne, transported to the makeshift holding pens at the Fair Grounds. Farrell Dobbs and Grant Dunne managed, by subterfuge, to slip away from the National Guard. Along with many secondary leaders of the strike, they wasted no time in establishing beefed-up picket lines throughout Minneapolis. They set up a series of "control points" around town, using friendly gas stations and public pay phones to direct flying pickets to "hot spots." An astute picket dispatcher, Henry Schultz, took charge of monitoring the Guardsmen's takeover of union headquarters. He demanded a detailed list of all "property" seized, cajoling McDevitt into allowing the commissary to move to the Central Labor Union/American Federation of Labor headquarters at First Avenue. Later in the day, it too would be raided by another 300 Guardsmen after some 2000 strikers and their supporters congregated there.

The union, forced to go underground, utilized guerrilla tactics to inflict "hit-and-run" punishment on scab trucking. As Dobbs later recalled, "Trucks operating with military permits were soon being put out of commission throughout the city. Within a few hours over 500 calls for help were reported to have come into the military headquarters. Troops in squad cars responded to the calls usually to find scabs who had been worked over, but no pickets. ... Despite everything the military tried to do ... the supposedly headless strike was full of life. The pickets were battling furiously and they were doing it skillfully." Dobbs may well have exaggerated the number of calls, many of which could have been made by strikers and sympathizers to draw the National Guard away from actual confrontations. The *Minneapolis Journal's* evening edition listed 25 separate incidents where troops were dispatched to scenes of trucks being stopped, vandalized, tipped over, or high-jacked, their scab drivers "educated" and their deliveries either damaged or dumped in poor neighborhoods and salvaged by those in need. The chaos was recorded in newspaper accounts, later reproduced in Walker's *American City*: "Marauding bands of pickets roamed the streets of Minneapolis today in automobiles and trucks, striking at commercial truck movements in widespread sections of the city. ... The continued picketing was regarded as a protest over the military arrest of Brown and the Dunnes,

strike leaders, together with sixty-eight others during and after Guardsmen raided strike headquarters and the Central Labor Union.”

When John Belor, an unemployed MCCW militant seriously wounded during the Bloody Friday shootings died during this day of retribution working-class resentment was further inflamed. Belor was unmarried, and his family wanted a quiet funeral. Local 574 simply paid all of the expenses associated with his burial and made sure that union men and women turned out in force to pay their last respects.¹⁶⁴

20 Olson: The Defective ‘Merits’ of a Progressive Pragmatism

Cannon once self-deprecatingly described himself as having the merits of his defects.¹⁶⁵ The reverse might be said of Olson, a self-proclaimed Farmer-Labor progressive, whose fair-weather commitment to working people was sorely tested in the rough climate of Minneapolis class struggle in July 1934. Declaring martial law, banning pickets, and permitting goods to be transported amounted to *de facto* strikebreaking. Arresting the union leadership and seizing its headquarters were clearly intended to intimidate Local 574 and stop the militant strike in its tracks. Olson rationalized his service to the trucking bosses with a bizarre and wrongly-formulated reference to his brief involvement with the radical syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World. “The problem with these leftists and ritualists,” the Farmer-Labor Party Governor explained pompously, is that “they want to ride in on a white horse with a pennant flying hell bent for the barricades. My method is a different one. ‘Boring from within’, which I learned from the Wobblies.”¹⁶⁶

164 The above paragraphs draw on Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 151–155, 164; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 155; Walker, *American City*, 204, 207–209; “Force of 800 Moves Under Cover of Night in Coup that Breaks Up Early Morning Picket Plan,” “Three Hundred Guardsmen Raid Second Strike Headquarters on First Avenue N. After 2,000 Gather,” “Walsh Statement,” “Governor Deplores Defiance by Union,” and “Second Striker Dies from Wound in July 20 Rioting,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 1 August 1934; “Workers to Attend Funeral of Belor,” *The Organizer*, 2 August 1934; “Bosses Prosecute Strikers’ Doctor,” *The Organizer*, 5 September 1934.

165 Jeanne Morgan, “Journal from James P. Cannon’s Office, 1954–1956 (Notes Kept by Secretary for Personal Memento, without Cannon’s Knowledge),” entry 26 January 1954, Copy in possession of Author, with thanks to Jeanne Morgan and Alan Wald: “Jim asks if I am familiar with the phrase, ‘He has the defects of his qualities.’ He notes that in his own case it is reversed, for he has the merit of his defects.”

166 Charles Rumford Walker, “The Farmer Labor Party of Minnesota, Part II: Governor Olson’s Last Interview,” *The Nation*, 20 March 1937, 319, in File: “Magazine Articles, Farmer Labor

Charles Rumford Walker painted Olson's abrupt about-face of 1 August 1934 as deriving from the Farmer-Laborite brand of electoral pragmatism, which viewed "swift accommodation of political principles" as the necessary and legitimate means of remaining in office. By the end of July 1934, Olson desperately wanted the strike settled and order restored in Minneapolis. Unable to cajole what he had referred to as a small clique within the Citizens' Alliance to some kind of compromise, he set his sights on the Trotskyist leadership of the teamster insurgency. Olson appreciated that his longstanding alliance with "Labor" was unravelling and that his posture as a radical would not survive a confrontation with serious militants such as Ray Dunne. When Olson had Dunne and others in the leadership of Local 574 arrested he was hoping to have his cake and eat it too. The Governor imagined that with this decisive move he would be seen as showing firmness and resolve, while also removing the Employers' Advisory Committee's main excuse for the rejection of the Hass-Dunnigan settlement plan, a supposed principled objection to meeting with "communists." Having displaced the union's "Reds" by lodging them in the National Guard's stockade, Olson thought he could prevail on the General Drivers' Union to establish a "rank-and-file" committee that was "truly representative" of the membership, which contained more Farmer-Labor supporters than Trotskyists. The strike could then be settled, with Olson enjoying the gratitude of most of the population of the state. The fly in this attractive ointment, applied to the gaping wounds of class war in Minneapolis, was that the rank-and-file of Local 574 stood solidly behind their incarcerated leaders and the militant approach to union organizing they charted so consciously.¹⁶⁷

Party, and Floyd B. Olson, 1933, 1937," Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS; Smemo, "The Politics of Labor Militancy in Minneapolis," 78.

167 Walker, *American City*, 204–209; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 156–157. For the escalating attack of the strike leadership on Olson's declaration of martial law and its claim that the Farmer-Labor governor was strikebreaking see "Strikers Demand Troop Removal: Committee Sees State Troops as Harming Strike – Scab Trucks Roll Under Military Protection," *The Organizer*, 28 July 1934; "More Interference by National Guard," *The Organizer*, 29 July 1934; "574 to Go On Fighting For Right to Live: Olson's Position Unsatisfactory to Committee," *The Organizer*, 31 July 1934; "Answer Military Tyranny by a General Protest Strike! Olson and State Troops Have Shown Their Colors! Union Men Show Yours! Our Headquarters Have Been Raided! Our Leaders Jailed! 574 Fights On!" *The Organizer*, 1 August 1934; Hugo Oehler, "Olson's Role in the Strike: A Demagogue at Work," *The Militant*, 11 August 1934. In contrast, the *Minneapolis Labor Review* and powerful elements within the Central Labor Union, like Roy Weir, took great pains to defend Olson, claiming that his unleashing of the National Guard was an attempt to curtail *illegal* picket activity, thus protecting the strike and preserving public support for the truckers' cause. See "Governor is Peacemaker in Driver Strike," *Minneapolis Labor Review*, 1 June 1934; "Troops Will Not Be Used

Ray Rainbolt, a member of the Sioux Nation and Kelly Postal, a veteran of the February 1934 coal yards strike, were elected to meet with Olson. They were anything but conciliatory. As Olson “talked and talked,” harping on the need “to settle this thing,” the two strikers were adamant about one point: “First you let out our leaders; after that we’ll talk.” From there the conversation went down-hill, with Rainbolt reminding the Farmer-Labor leader of his dilemma, “Governor, you’re right in the middle, on a picket fence. Watch your step or you’ll slip and hurt yourself bad.” Olson kept talking, but the dizzying spin didn’t faze Postal and Rainbolt, whose more polite interjections included the query, “Why don’t you start a school for strikebreaking governors?”

Olson eventually got the point, and concentrated on locating Farrell Dobbs and Grant Dunne, who managed to successfully evade Guardsmen’s arrest, even though troops ransacked apartment buildings looking for them. Utilizing his labor movement friends, Olson got one of his supporters, Bob Cramer of the *Minneapolis Labor Review*, to put him in touch with Grant Dunne. The Governor promised to rescind the outstanding warrants on Dobbs and Dunne if they would talk with him. The two fugitives agreed, and with Rainbolt, Postal, and two other members of the Strike Committee of 100, met with Olson. They convinced him that unless the strike leaders were released from the military stockade and the strike headquarters evacuated by the troops occupying it and returned to Local 574 in the same condition as it was originally seized, “The strike will go right on, picketing and all.”¹⁶⁸

Even the most conservative layers of American Federation of Labor officialdom were outraged at the thought of trade union buildings being seized by National Guardsmen. Popular sentiment in favor of a General Strike was rising. *The Organizer* called on Olson to search and seize the offices of the Citizens’ Alliance. It further demanded the complete evacuation of the National Guard from Minneapolis. When Olson opened the 1 August 1934 issue of the daily strike bulletin, he read the following condemnation:

Military tyranny has reached its peak in Minneapolis. For the first time in decades, a trade union headquarters has been occupied by military forces

to Break Strike,” *Minneapolis Labor Review*, 3 August 1934; Smemo, “The Politics of Labor Militancy in Minneapolis,” 34–38, quoting Weir, Manuscript 848, Box 15, Folder 6, “Membership Meeting Minutes, Teamsters Local 574, 6 July 1934,” Farrell Dobbs Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin. The most sympathetic account of Olson remains Mayer, *Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 184–222.

¹⁶⁸ The above paragraphs draw on Walker, *American City*, 208–212; “No Decision on Injunction: 574 is Ready for Anything,” “The Real Issue and the Fake Issues,” and “Open House at Strike G.H.Q.” *The Organizer*, 10 August 1934.

and trade union leaders have been arrested and imprisoned in a military stockade. Picket cars are ordered off the street while every scab truck gets a free permit. ... A dastardly blow has been struck at the very heart of the labor movement by military forces under the command of Floyd B. Olson, Governor of the State of Minnesota.

Cannon and others putting out *The Organizer* reminded Olson that he would pay a large electoral price for his campaign of repression:

We have been dealt heavy blows – first by the bosses of the Citizens Alliance, then by their murderous tools in the Police Department. Now Floyd Olson's National Guard points bayonets and machine guns at us and tells us to give up our fight and go back as beaten slaves. They ordered us to quit picketing. Our answer is the right to picket has been conquered and defended by the labor movement for a hundred years. We shall never give it up. They raided our headquarters with a thousand National Guardsmen, equipped with field machine guns, the latest model tear gas bombs, bayonets and pistols, commanded by the 'friend of labor,' Floyd B. Olson. ... Let him run for office now on the platform, 'I raided the headquarters of Local 574. I flung their leaders into the military stockade. I broke a strike which Johannes couldn't break. Therefore, workers and farmers vote for me.'

"Resistance to tyranny is the beginning of freedom," declared the defiant voice of Local 574 strikers, in an appeal to Minneapolis trade unionists to form a solid wall of defense around the beleaguered General Drivers' Union. **"Answer Olson's military tyranny with the General Strike of Protest!"**¹⁶⁹

Cannon used his "dere emily" column to depict rising working-class resentment against the progressive governor, now himself in need of the protection of the National Guard:

I never herd guys rave against a man, like what I herd workers all over the city rave against Olson today, and I guess he nos just how the workers feel becuz this afternoon he went over to the radison hotel to have a little get-

169 "Answer Military Tyranny by a General Protest Strike!" "Troops Take Over Labor Headquarters," and "574 Asks CLU to Call General Strike," *The Organizer*, 1 August 1934 (bolded emphasis in the original); "Strikers Defy Olson Militia: Local 574 Issues Call for a Protest General Strike," *The Militant*, 4 August 1934. See also Skoglund interview with Halstead, 24 April 1955, Transcript, 31, Box 2, Riehle Papers, MNHS.

together with the bosses, and darned if about 800 nashunal guards didn't line the streets on both sides and keep people from getting anywhere near the hotel.

Meanwhile, roving pickets continued to harass and stop trucks; the campaign to remove the Mayor and the Chief of Police continued; Women's Auxiliary members organized a tag day to raise money for striking families; and the Saturday 4 August 1934 funeral of John Belor had constituted authority thinking that things could go from bad to worse very quickly. One farmer-labor newspaper claimed that Olson's use of martial law against strikers and dissidents was "costing the governor thousands of votes daily – and it is also jeopardizing the success of the splendid farmer-labor program." The Farmer-Labor Party Club at the University of Minnesota sent Olson a blunt telegram: "This is to notify you that you have been expelled as honorary Chairman of our organization."¹⁷⁰

Olson realized that his plan to sever the union ranks from their militant leadership and engineer a quick settlement was backfiring. Picketing was more aggressive than ever; scab truckers were not above arming themselves and unloading shotguns into strikers who blocked their path. The pragmatic Governor abruptly changed gears once again and agreed to meet Local 574's conditions for resuming discussions. On 2 August 1934, Ray Dunne, Micky Dunne, and Bill Brown were back in strike headquarters celebrating their release, discussing the strike and its strategy, and orchestrating picket activities. Lists of requests for military and police aid to trucks halted by strikers continued to be published in the newspapers, and Cochran and the EAC largely stuck to their guns, offering proposals for a settlement that they knew would be unacceptable to the General Drivers' Union. Before Ray Dunne was released he and General Walsh, in charge of the National Guard, exchanged a few acrimonious words with Olson acting as an Olympian referee. The Governor did what he could to salvage his reputation as a progressive by claiming that the non-existent required permit for the General Drivers' Union mass meeting supposedly turned up, negating the validity of the arrest warrants for the strike leadership.

¹⁷⁰ "dere emily," *The Organizer*, 1 August 1934; "Removal Pleas Are Taken Up: Brown Testifies Before Welfare Committee," *The Organizer*, 31 July 1934; "Tomorrow's 574's Tag Day," and "John Belor, M.C.C.W.," *The Organizer*, 3 August 1934; "John Belor Buried," *The Organizer*, 4 August 1934; "574 at Belor Funeral," and "Tag Day a Success," *The Organizer*, 6 August 1934; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 156–157; "Martial Law a 'Mistake,'" *Minneapolis Journal*, 9 August 1934.

A raid on Alliance headquarters was also conducted. It was undertaken by a mere dozen Guardsmen, as opposed to the 800 who descended on the union's strike headquarters. Documents seized, according to Olson, vindicated his allegations that this body "dominates and controls the Employers Advisory Committee," that stool pigeons in the pay of the Alliance infiltrated unions, and that the Alliance routinely coerced other employers and operated in defiance of the United States Department of Labor and Roosevelt's National Recovery Administration. Charles Rumford Walker concluded, "A blow to the left, softened by a blow to the right – classic and time-honored formula for reformists 'put in the middle' by class forces!"

In assessing the role of Olson in the Minneapolis struggle, Hugo Oehler wrote: "The Farmer Labor Governor of Minnesota is pressed between two warring camps – between the workers and the capitalists, represented by Local 574, and by the Citizen's Alliance. Whoever exerts the greatest pressure will force this radical petty bourgeois to alter his course." Oehler detailed Olson's original use of marital law against Local 574, and how the outraged popular reaction compelled Olson to reverse his course, releasing the strike leaders, directing his bombastic fire at the Citizens' Alliance, and changing the terms of transport through the permit system. The result was that Olson "regained some of his lost prestige" among workers. Oehler suggested that Olson's susceptibility to mass pressure did not change the fact that at bottom he was a class opponent, but it did provide the union's militant leadership with room to maneuver and exploit the "division within the camp of the enemy" that the Farmer-Labor governor represented.¹⁷¹

21 Standing Fast: Satire and Solidarity

Militia courts began to hand down 60–90 day sentences of military labor for picket line violations; truck firms upped scab pay to \$35 weekly (almost double

¹⁷¹ The above paragraphs draw on "Leaders of 574 Released," and "574 Promised Walsh Nothing: Leaders Said Picketing Would not Cease," *The Organizer*, 2 August 1934; "Strikers Back at Old Stand After Parley," "Employers' Proposal," and "Order Release of 2 Dunnes and Brown," *Minneapolis Journal*, 2 August 1934; "Truck Driver Fires on Pickets," *Minneapolis Journal*, 4 August 1934; "Drivers Force Release of 4 Leaders," *The Militant*, 4 August 1934; "Strikers Elated by New Gains: Union Rejects Employers' New Proposal," *The Organizer*, 2 August 1934; "We Have Won the Fight on the Picket Line! We Shall Not Lose It in the Settlement! Dunne Speaks on Bosses Plan, Says It Contains Several Ridiculous Proposals," *The Organizer*, 3 August 1934; "The Road to Victory," *The Organizer*, 4 August 1934; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 167; Walker, *American City*, 210–213; Hugo Oehler, "Once Again on the Role of Governor Olson," *The Militant*, 18 August 1934.

what most drivers earned before the walkout); and rumors circulated about the Bergoff strike-breaking agency bringing in “pug uglies” from New York. Yet there were also important divisions emerging among the trucking bosses, some of whom were ready to settle on the basis of the earlier mediators’ suggestions. The EAC, angered by Olson’s raid on Citizens’ Alliance headquarters, and increasingly bellicose in its criticism of the Farmer-Labor governor,¹⁷² turned to the federal courts. It attempted to secure an injunction against martial law, claiming the Governor’s declaration of danger and the presence of the National Guard to protect citizens was inhibiting lawful business activity. Conservative American Federation of Labor figureheads clamored for a settlement, and precipitated yet another flurry of activity on the part of federal mediators Father Haas and E.H. Dunnigan.

These Washington wise men were being advised by the Roosevelt administration to turn to influential elements in the Minneapolis banking milieu to twist the arm of the Employers’ Committee. The Stalinist Communist Party carped from the sidelines that Local 574’s leadership was urging “the workers to depend on Governor Olson,” and that they were little more than “Trotzkyites for Martial Law.” Led by Sam K. Davis, the Communists tried to muscle-in on the 4,000-strong Minneapolis Central Council of Workers, the local unemployed movement that was now firmly aligned with the General Drivers’ Union strike and its leadership. Such efforts merely led to Davis being rebuffed. At mass rallies called by 574, the Stalinists had to be restrained from carrying banners denouncing the Local’s leadership. *The Organizer* did its best to keep the rank-and-file from harming these Communist Party malcontents, explaining that as offensive as these sectarian critics were their leaflets should not be torn up. Nor should they be subjected to serious physical attack: “They are not stool pigeons – at least, not conscious ones; they are just a little bit nutty and what they need is a friendly boot in the posterior. Maybe the shock will bring them to their senses.” Amidst these various developments, the employers continued to blast away at the leadership question from the depths of their ideological bunkers, claiming that, “Communism is still the real issue in this strike. The employers will not surrender to Communism.” The *Minneapolis Journal* edit-

172 Charles Rumford Walker assembled a voluminous body of evidence detailing the increasingly irrational hostility of employers to Olson. See Files: “American City: Employer Side,” “American City: Incomplete Notes and Articles,” and “Miscellaneous Papers, 1934–1936,” Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS. This material includes quotes from the Minneapolis press, EAC circulars, the Joseph Cochran/EAC typescript, “The Truth About the Drivers’ Strike,” and Citizens’ Alliance of Minneapolis, “The So-Called Truck Drivers’ Strike,” *Special Weekly Bulletin*, 3 August 1934. See also, Millikan, *A Union Against Unions*, 281–285.

orialized that Minneapolis was on the brink of anarchy, and that the General Drivers' Union's refusal to comply with martial law constituted "The Beginning of the End."¹⁷³

Cannon used his humorous, vernacular style to lampoon the anti-Red hysteria fomented in Citizens' Alliance circles and propagated by the servile mainstream press. "Spilling the Dirt – A Bughouse Fable," appeared in *The Organizer* and was supposedly a stenographer's transcript of testimony wheedled out of the daily strike bulletin's editor before a kangaroo court convened by the Employers' Advisory Committee Chair, Joseph Cochran. In this raucous exposé, Cannon both pokes fun and makes serious comment, his revolutionary pedagogy eliciting laughter as well as sober political reflection:

The editor of *The Organizer* was picked up and taken before the kangaroo court for questioning. The examining officer had been eating onions and drinking scab beer, and his breath was so strong that it overcame the editor and he broke down and confessed everything.

OFFICER: You might as well come clean now. Give us the whole dope.

EDITOR: O.K., officer, I'm willing to tell everything. But, would you mind turning your breath the other way for a minute. I'm a bit sick.

OFFICER: Who's dis guy called Father Haas? What's the tie-up between him and Governor Olson and youse guys?

EDITOR: His real name is Haasky. He's a Russian Bolshevik, brought over here by the Brain Trust to put across a modified form of communism through the NRA. Cochran got the goods on him, all right. His proposal of 42 ½ cents an Hour is practically the same thing as communism. He writes editorials for the *Militant* under an assumed name.

OFFICER: Spill the rest of it. What about Dunnigan, Olson, Brown, and the Dunne brothers – how many of these here Dunne brothers is there all told?

173 "Militia Court Sentences Six," *The Organizer*, 4 August 1934; "Bosses Import 'Pug-Uglies,'" and "Fink Rate Up Due to Pickets," *The Organizer*, 3 August 1934; "A Touch of Comedy," *The Organizer*, 7 August 1934; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 156–160; Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 254–265; "Labor Unions Take Hand to Bring Peace," "The Beginning of the End," *Minneapolis Journal*, 2 August 1934; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 164–167; Dunne and Childs, *Permanent Counter-Revolution*, 42–47; Old Timer, "Drivers' Strike Reveals Workers Great Resources," *The Organizer*, 11 August 1934.

EDITOR: Their real name is Dunnskovitsky. They are Irish Jews from County Cork, smuggled into the country about six months ago disguised as sacks of Irish potatoes. There are 17 of them in Minneapolis, all the same age, and they all holler for 42 ½ cents an hour. They say that's beginning of communism, and they are all strong for it. They have a brother in New York who is a famous acrobat. He inspired the popular ballad, "The Man on the Flying Trapeze." Mr. Dunnigan's right name is Dunnigansky – a cousin of the Dunne boys and hand in glove with them on the 42 ½ cents an hour racket.

OFFICER: What about Brown?

EDITOR: He's a Jew named Bronstein, a fish peddler from the east side of New York. He came here a few weeks ago and tried to sell Bismark herring down at the market. Then he lined up with the Dunnskovitskys and muscled into the union racket. He's sitting pretty now and doesn't have to peddle herring any more. By the way, he is a son of Leon Bronstein – that's the original name of this guy Trotsky that started all the trouble over in Russia.

OFFICER: How about Governor Olson? He's in wit youse guys in the communist racket, ain't he?

EDITOR: Sure! That's the slickest part of the whole game. That guy's a card. His right name is not Olson, and he's not a Swede either – that's just a gag to get the Scandinavian vote. He's a Russian importation – direct from Moscow – and his real name is Olsonovich. He's been a big help to the strike. That raid he pulled off at the union headquarters, and the throwing of the pickets into the stockade, was all a trick to get sympathy for the strikers.

OFFICER: This is getting too deep for me. Who cooked up this whole Scheme, anyway?

EDITOR: Well, to tell the truth, it was planned out in Constantinople a few months ago. Some of the boys worked a week driving trucks and saved up enough money to take a trip to Europe. They went over to Constantinople to see Trotsky and get instructions for their next move. Trotsky said: "Boys, I want a revolution in Minneapolis before snow flies." They said, "O.K.," and started to leave. Just as they were about to take the boat, Vincent Dunne stepped up to old man Trotsky and said, 'What's your last word of advice before we go?'

OFFICER: What did Trotsky say?

EDITOR: He said, 'Boys, keep your eye on Olsonovich. He is liable to double cross you any minute.'

In *American City*, Charles Rumford Walker described Cannon's article as the most effective of many forays into "imaginative political satire" produced by the Trotskyists during the strike. "Anything for a laugh in Minneapolis," was how Cannon remembered it, as the union leadership sought to see the lighter side while confronting state violence and the intransigence of its class adversaries.¹⁷⁴

As July gave way to August the situation grew increasingly complicated. Olson continued to pressure for a settlement, and was threatening to revoke permits for all but absolute necessities, simultaneously using the National Guard to crack down on "forcible picketing." Scores of pickets were being held in the military stockade, and Olson used an Executive Order to rescind 9000 transit permits only to distribute 1000 new licenses. Employers continued to harp on communism, the right of scabs to be employed in any back-to-work scenario, and trucking firms' refusal to take back on to their payrolls any workers who engaged in illegal acts. The General Drivers' Union made no concessions. It insisted that the original Haas-Dunnigan plan be a blueprint for any settlement.

Almost fifty firms broke ranks with the Alliance/EAC stand, accepting the Haas-Dunnigan terms and resuming normal business operations. As *The Organizer* published a list of "The 166 Tyrants" who precipitated the strike into its third week, it in effect called for a boycott of these anti-union holdouts: "The mass of the population, which likes to know where it spends its money, will be interested in reading the names of these 166 tyrants." Countering this trade union attack on the Citizens' Alliance and the intransigent trucking employers, newspapers like the *Minneapolis Journal* ran full-page advertising propaganda statements extolling the virtues of those who would stand fast against menacing "Reds." Great umbrage was taken at the Olson-ordered militia raid on the Citizens' Alliance: "This invasion of our constitutional rights climaxes the campaign of insult, abuse and misrepresentation which Governor Olson has for some time waged against the Citizen's Alliance." Unions such as the milk drivers made substantial donations to the coffers of Local 574, but on the streets Women's Auxiliary members distributing *The Organizer* were harassed and persecuted by Guardsmen while Trotskyists selling *The Militant* were subject to arrest.

In this volatile situation, 40,000 turned out to the Parade Grounds to hear Bill Brown, Miles Dunne, and Albert Goldman call on the strikers to stand fast.

174 Cannon, "Spilling the Dirt – a Bughouse Fable," *Notebook of an Agitator*, 84–86; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 169–170; Walker, *American City*, 215–216; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 163.

Maintaining firm picket lines and relying on their own strengths were the only ways the workers would win. The struggling teamsters of Minneapolis were now on the front lines in a United States battle to bring into existence a militant industrial unionism. Martial law was denounced, and the immediate release of 120 trade unionists being held in the military stockade demanded. Solidarity was the watchword. Cannon took up this theme in an instalment of his "dere emily" column: "if they is one thing us workers has got to lern, emily, it is this. it wont never do us no good to be ambishus for ourselves only. we got to be ambishus for ALL our workin class brothers and sisters, and rise with our whole class."¹⁷⁵

In the swirl of events curbs on trucking proclaimed one day were eased the next. Olson wasn't sure which way to turn. A growing number of trucking firms decided they too could live with the conditions of the original Haas-Dunnigan suggested settlement. But these defections only seemed to steel the resolve of Cochran and the Citizens' Alliance-led Employers' Advisory Committee. Its legal attempt to end martial law stalled, however, as hearings were postponed in what some interpreted as prevarication by the judiciary. The streets seemed relatively quiet, but it was difficult to know how long the equilibrium would last, and the General Drivers' Union insisted any dramatic change in the *status quo* would be met with a revival of picketing and that truck movement would be opposed vigorously. As newspaper headlines complained "Peace Moves at Standstill," Cochran hammered away at the consequences of accepting the set-

¹⁷⁵ The above paragraphs draw on Leaflet, "Minneapolis Workers and Friends of the Strikers," in File: "Notes Local 574 and Strike," Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS; "Governor Demands Strike End by Midnight: Threatens to Bear Down on Both Sides," *Minneapolis Journal*, 3 August 1934; "Union Holding Out for Original Haas Plan," *Minneapolis Journal*, 4 August 1934; "Time to End the Strike," "Truck Permit Withdrawal Is Next Step," "Strong Explains Aims of Citizens' Alliance," "What is the Citizens Alliance?" *Minneapolis Journal*, 5 August 1934; "Dunne Speaks on Boss Plan," *The Organizer*, 3 August 1934; "Strike Rally Breaks Record: 40,000 Turn Out to Support 574," "The Fight of 574: Excerpts from Addresses on the Parade," "The President in Minneapolis," "News and Views," "Here Are the 166 Tyrants! Union Reveals Holdout List," and "Oil Workers Hold Meeting," *The Organizer*, 7 August 1934; "Tyrants Ring Shows Signs of Crack Under Mass Blows: Four of Infamous 166 Accept Terms," "Jewish Workers Aid 574," and "Milk Drivers Give \$6000: Brother Unions Rallying as Fight Goes On," *The Organizer*, 8 August 1934; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 175; "Using Permits for 'Bootleg,'" *The Organizer*, 9 August 1934; "Martial Law and the Strike," *The Organizer*, 11 August 1934; "Drivers Ranks Hold Firm as Bosses Committee of 166 Begins to Crack: 574 Backed by Workers in Mass Meet," *The Militant*, 4 August 1934; "Ban Halts All But Necessities," "Two Sides Locked Over Terms of Re-Employment," and "Governor's Executive Order Limiting Trucks," *Minneapolis Journal*, 6 August 1934; "dere emily," *The Organizer*, 13 August 1934.

tlement protocols of Haas-Dunnigan. Nothing less than the survival of free enterprise capitalism was at stake:

If the 'Haas-Dunnigan proposals' were accepted by the employers, it would enable Local 574 to claim a victory for communist leadership in this strike, having obtained an increase in wages without or before arbitration, and thereby give prestige to the communistic leaders of the strikers. Such a victory would be followed, naturally, by a campaign to get more men into that union and commit that many more to taking orders from the communists. With this accomplished, other unions would be seduced by the communists and, shortly, all or most of Minneapolis union labor would be communized. Thus communism, after all, is still the real issue in this strike. The mediator's proposal is that the employers surrender. The employers will not surrender to communism.

Ralph M. Beckwith, a member of the Employers' Advisory Committee, took to radio airwaves on 8 August 1934 to make the same point, arguing that, "The communists are boring from within, wherever they can get an entry into union labor. Their intention is to take possession of labor organizations here and everywhere, and with that foothold, to upset the whole American economic and government system and replace it eventually with the soviet state." The original Haas-Dunningan proposal agreed to reluctantly by Local 574, Beckwith insisted, was nothing more than "recognition of communistic leadership for a working man in Minneapolis."¹⁷⁶

176 "Court Postpones Martial Law Hearing; Curb on Permits to Trucks Eased, 4,100 Get Papers; 351 Operators Sign Haas-Dunnigan Agreement; Peace Moves at Standstill; Employers' Chairman Says Communism is Still Issue," *Minneapolis Journal*, 7 August 1934; "100,000 Cheer Roosevelt ...: Truck Strike Peace Moves At Standstill," and "Employers Strike Views Given In Cochran Talk," *Minneapolis Journal*, 8 August 1934; "Beckwith Gives Employer Views on Strike," *Minneapolis Journal*, 9 August 1934; "Text of Kvam Address on Strike Controversy," *Minneapolis Journal*, 10 August 1934; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 157–160; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 171; Walker, *American City*, 217; "Bosses Find Rev. Haas Red," *The Organizer*, 9 August 1934. Ideologues such as Cochran and Beckwith had no taste for doctrinal differences on the left. They congealed Trotskyism and Stalinism, and their anti-strike tirades in the sources cited above represented the CLA figures leading Local 574, as well as the united front unemployed group, the Minneapolis Central Council of Workers, as affiliated with "the Communist Party." Stalinist Sam K. Davis was sometimes charged with being responsible for the strike, when he attacked its leadership relentlessly.

22 Mediation's Meanderings

With the Citizens' Alliance-led quest for an injunction against Olson's declaration of martial law finally squashed late in the second week of August, Haas and Dunnigan came under increased pressure from Washington to revise and reinvigorate a mediated settlement.¹⁷⁷ Given the intransigence of the employers, the mediators decided to present a new proposal to a wider Local 574 body. Their aim was to circumvent the negotiating team of Farrell Dobbs and Ray Dunne, who flatly opposed any concessions on wages and insisted that all strikers be hired back regardless of how the employers judged their conduct during the strike. Dobbs and Dunne, well aware that the new settlement plan was a retreat from the terms of the first Haas-Dunningan proposal, wanted no backtracking. Haas and Dunnigan thought their chances of securing Local 574's agreement to a watered down accord would be greater if they were able to pitch their revised back-to-work terms to the entire Strike Committee of 100. Confident that this larger body would find the revised settlement terms equally unacceptable, the General Drivers' Union negotiating duo agreed that Haas and Dunningan could speak to the 100-strong committee at union headquarters. This meeting took place on Monday evening, 13 August 1934.

Cannon later noted that the summit was carefully "planned and prepared in advance." Haas and Dunnigan "got a meeting that [they] never bargained for." After hearing the terms of the mediators' suggested settlement, the assembly of strikers turned ugly, taking on the tone of an inquisition. *The Organizer* reported, "Man after man arose and either asked a question which made the Federal men squirm, or threw in their teeth defiant refusals to consider the new rotten scheme." Haas and Dunnigan were assailed for recommending that pickets sign an agreement that could well bar them from a job because they had committed illegal acts. The strikers also queried how it was that the mediators approached them over the head of the Dobbs-Dunne negotiating committee when they failed to "force the 166 bosses to get together and take a secret ballot on the *original* Haas-Dunnigan plan?" A Catholic worker rose to address Haas, calling it "a crying shame when a man wearing the cloth of the Church as you do stands up before his brother workers and attempts to swindle them into acceptance of such a sell-out as you are giving us."

177 "Enforcing of Law Held Job of Governor," "Text of Decision," "Strike Stirs Washington Into Action," and "Why Not Order Elections, Father Haas?" *Minneapolis Journal*, 11 August 1934; "Injunction is Refused," *The Organizer*, 11 August 1934; "Conspire to Break Strike! Bosses Claim Haas Support," *The Organizer*, 13 August 1934; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 249.

Haas and Dunnigan wriggled around, claiming that the proposals were not theirs, and that while they were recommending them, they did not endorse them. This hair-splitting only fueled the anger of the Committee members, and Haas became visibly uncomfortable, "pale as a ghost and sweating." Local 574 President, Bill Brown, stated the union's position clearly:

We have been fighting for four weeks; all of us have sacrificed and struggled; two of our brothers lie dead at the hands of the bosses agents. We accepted your first plan. And now you ask us to bow our heads and go back to the old slavery and you would speak of fairness and honor? I tell you that when we accepted the Haas-Dunnigan proposal we gave up all we mean to give up. We will not budge another inch.

Brown received a rousing ovation. No less enthusiastic was the applause given Ray Dunne's summary of the situation:

You ask us to give the bosses a license to discriminate especially against our pickets for the very activity that builds the Union and wins a strike. We will not dishonor ourselves by delivering up our best men to these vicious employers. If we did we might as well abandon unionism. And you give us no wage guarantee. What do you mean 'present wage scales'? There are none. ... Are you going to put us in the position of rejecting this rotten proposal.

Haas and Dunnigan came to Local 574's headquarters intent on getting a vote on their new accord, and the Committee of 100 obliged. After consulting with those of their number locked up in the military stockade, the union body overwhelmingly rejected what it designated the "bosses offer." Herbert Solow later reported that, "Haas and Dunnigan were crucified by the rank and file." As Haas was leaving the hall, a young Roman Catholic ripped a crucifix off his neck and hurled it at the shaken priest. Cannon thought the ecclesiastic looked "physically sick."¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ The above paragraphs draw on "Haas, Dunnigan Hear Rank and File Flay 'New' Boss Scheme; Deny Endorsing It," and "Union Rejects Offer," *The Organizer*, 14 August 1934; Walker, *American City*, 217–218; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 171–172; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 165; "Federal Mediators Push Strike Truce," and "The Haas-Dunnigan Plan," *Minneapolis Journal*, 13 August 1934; "Negotiators Indicate Only One Question Left to Solve," *Minneapolis Journal*, 13 August 1934; "Peace Plan Failure Deadlocks Strike," "Employers' Statement," and "Text of Employers' Proposals for Peace," *Minneapolis Journal*,

In a terse *post-mortem*, Cannon observed that mediation's meanderings were over: "Dunnigan was finished, Father Haas was finished." As a parting shot, the two supposed conciliators recommended that the National Labor Relations Board in Washington hold elections in the 166 firms organized by the Employers' Advisory Committee to ascertain employee wishes regarding union representation. Local 574 opposed this for a variety of reasons. First, the list of firms where elections were to take place was the creation of the employers; the union had no members whatsoever in 21 of these 166 firms, and its original strike was never waged against the long list of EAC-affiliated trucking outfits, many of which were transitory, marginal, and employed only a few workers. The General Drivers' Union thus placed the accent on its right to represent its membership, rather than having its existence defined by a list of firms constructed by its adversaries. Second, *The Organizer* pilloried the mediators' proposed "fake elections" as a strike-breaking ruse. It pointed out that the employers would likely provide the election monitors with padded lists of workers, making sure that scabs had the right to vote. Third, Local 574 continued to try to widen support for the strike, as opposed to collapse its outcome into this kind of state-orchestrated procedure. Brown and Mick Dunne were working with connections in the Minnesota State Federation of Labor to promote the idea of a 48-hour sympathetic General Strike.

AFL bureaucrats were willing to offer paper endorsements to the embattled strikers, but not actually call workers into the streets to support the General Drivers' Union. Both William Green and Tobin opposed the militant truckers' insurgency from the outset and maneuvered throughout the strikes of 1934 to stymie attempts to create a single, inclusive union in the trucking sector.

It was at this point, according to Carlos Hudson, a young Trotskyist involved in the daily production of *The Organizer*, that the Stalinists increased their attacks on the strike leadership. Communist Party spokesmen argued that the rank-and-file should have been pushed to go over the heads of mainstream trade union officials and Governor Olson, to whom these labor bureaucrats looked for guidance, mounting a General Strike to bring the employers to their knees and topple the Farmer-Labor government. Skoglund claimed that the Stalinists were also proposing that militants "set up a workers' rule of the city." Challenging the very institutions of bourgeois authority and civil society in

14 August 1934; Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 259–260; Blantz, "Father Haas and the Minneapolis Truckers' Strike of 1934," 13–14; "Conspiracy to Break Mpls. Strike Smashed by Committee of 100: Haas and Dunnigan Exposed as Aiding Bosses in Fake Agreement," *The Militant*, 18 August 1934; Herbert Solow, "The Great Minneapolis Strike," *New Leader*, 8 September 1934.

this way would undoubtedly have resulted in intensified state repression and scuttled the attempt to establish collective bargaining rights across the trucking industry.

Local 574's opposition to an imposed NLRB "electoral solution" to the impasse of mid-August 1934 was under attack from all directions. The union was also running short of funds to continue the battle and, as the odd striker broke ranks and returned to work, there was concern and anxiety that the solidarity sustaining the struggle was faltering. The General Drivers' Union, now in its third difficult strike fought out over the course of six months, and grappling with the deaths of two union men and hundreds of court cases, was under considerable pressure to settle the strike. But so too were there cracks in the resolve of the employers, with defections of a number of trucking firms. This set the stage for the arrival of a new federal mediator, P.A. Donoghue, on 15 August 1934. Fresh from a stint in San Francisco, where he managed to settle the tumultuous longshore strike, Donoghue was "getting a press buildup as a hotshot."¹⁷⁹

Within the Communist League of America's five-person, informal strike committee, Albert Goldman first aired the view that the strike was lost, and that it was time to concede defeat. Goldman argued that the signs of striker demoralization were evident and understandable: children were hungry; electricity, gas, and water services were being shut off in working-class households for lack of payments; landlords were posting eviction notices because monthly rents were in arrears. A growing number of trucks were moving through Minneapolis streets, protected by military permits. The National Guard was arresting militant pickets with apparent ease. Finally, Goldman worried that the mediators' election proposal would carry the day and undo much that had been achieved in previous battles. Ray Dunne, Skoglund, and Dobbs disagreed vehemently

179 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 165; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 175–176; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 161–163; Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 261; "Lawson Talk on City Truck Strike," *Minneapolis Journal*, 14 August 1934; "Employers Ask F.R. To Order Vote," and "Text of Strike Talk by Rathbun," *Minneapolis Journal*, 15 August 1934; "Donoghue to Select Day Upon Arrival," *Minneapolis Journal*, 15 August 1934; "A New Strike-Breaking Scheme," *The Organizer*, 16 August 1934; "The 'Elections' are a Fraud! Bosses' Scheme to outlaw Unionism by Scab Votes and Padded Lists; Secret Circular of Employers Advisory Committee Reveals Vile Plot," *The Organizer*, 17 August 1934; "All Unions Asked to Support 574 by 2-Day General Strike Demonstration," and "Election Call is Boss Trick," *The Organizer*, 18 August 1934; "Two Day General Strike Asked: Truckers Seek Sympathy Tie-Up," *Minneapolis Journal*, 20 August 1934; "Rift Seen in Truck Driver Ranks: AFL Rejects General Strike," *Minneapolis Journal*, 21 August 1934; Carlos Hudson, "Chains Wear Thin in Minneapolis," Typescript, 26, in File: "Local 574 Strike 1934," Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS; Skoglund interview with Halstead, 24 April 1955, Transcript, 31, Box 2, Riehle Papers, MNHS.

that it was time to “give up, call it off.” Skoglund thought Goldman’s suggestion to wind things down would precipitate a “complete defeat and a rout” from which “No pieces could be saved.” Telling the Chicago attorney that “he would never put that proposal over as long as I was alive,” Skoglund refused to consider capitulating to the bosses. Cannon listened. As the authoritative figure on the CLA committee, he eventually sided with “the leaders in closest touch with the ranks.” He suggested that if they thought the strike could still be won, there must be some fight left in the membership. Goldman was persuaded that the struggle should continue.

Under the pseudonym “Old Timer,” Cannon penned an article in *The Organizer* that was undoubtedly influenced by this inner-circle discussion. It presented Local 574 as blazing a new path out of the dead-end accommodation to the bosses that had become so typical of the old AFL craft unionism. Workers needed unions that gave them at least a fighting chance. The struggle of the General Drivers’ Union was just such an endeavor. What was different about Local 574, Cannon pointed out, was its combination of militant leadership and an approach to working-class mobilization that was inclusive rather than exclusive. All workers, Cannon wrote, were drawn into the teamster struggle, be they organized or unorganized, male or female, employed or jobless. The Minneapolis General Drivers’ Union’s prodigious fighting capacity flowed from a commitment to forge an unbreakable solidarity among all sectors of the working class in the ongoing, relentless, war against capital.¹⁸⁰

23 Sudden and Unexpected Victory

The new mediator, P.A. Donoghue, was given his marching orders directly from President Roosevelt, who wanted to see a speedy conclusion to the strike. Roosevelt was concerned about the approaching elections in November 1934, in which Olson and the Farmer-Labor Party were supporting his New Deal agenda. The President feared that if the Minneapolis strike dragged on, Olson’s capacity to campaign on behalf of his administration would weaken.

180 The above paragraphs draw on Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 176–177; Skoglund interview with Halstead, 24 April 1955, Transcript, 30, Box 2, Riehle Papers, MNHS; Old Timer [Cannon], “574 Strike Methods Are Blazing New Labor Paths,” 18 August 1934, reprinted under the title “The Secret of Local 574,” in Cannon, *Notebook of an Agitator*, 89–92; Harry Ring interview with James P. Cannon, 23 February 1974, 14; 29 March 1974, 5–9, typescript in possession of author.

Local 574 had already accepted one mediation plan. This inclined Donoghue to view the Employers' Advisory Committee as the major obstacle to a settlement. He therefore set out to find a way to let the trucking companies save face, while still accepting the Haas-Dunnigan formula.¹⁸¹ The Citizens' Alliance propagandists, heads firmly in the sand, were, as late as August 1934, still referring to the "so-called truck drivers' strike."¹⁸²

Donoghue met with Citizens' Alliance "guiding spirit" and EAC member, A.W. Strong, who was being softened up behind the scenes by John W. Barton and Clive Talbot Jeffrey, conservative Republican bankers with posts in federal financial institutions. Recipients of millions of dollars of loans from Roosevelt's Reconstruction Finance Corporation, they let Strong know that the lid must be put back on Minneapolis's volatile class relations. Donoghue pushed Strong into making concessions on two issues that Haas and Dunnigan made clear were deal-breakers for Local 574. First, all strikers must be rehired, regardless of whether or not they engaged in "illegal activity" or "violence" during the strike. Second, specific hourly wage rates needed to be stipulated. Having secured the employers' agreement to give in on these issues, Donoghue laid down protocols for the conduct of employee representation elections, which the Regional Labor Board was to hold within ten days. Donoghue accepted Local 574's demand that only workers who had been on trucking firm payrolls as of 16 July 1934 were eligible to vote. Scabs, or "loyal employees" as the EAC referred to them, were not to participate in the Board elections.

On the critical issue of "inside workers," the breakthrough of the original Haas-Dunnigan proposal was maintained: everyone employed in the trucking sector, including drivers, helpers, platform workers, and inside workers in the 22 market firms at the center of the strike were allowed to vote. Workers who spent sixty percent or more of their time selling goods were deemed ineligible to participate in the election. As a concession to the employers, Donoghue included all 166 EAC-affiliated trucking firms in the vote, even though the vast major-

181 On the complicated continuity of mediation meanderings, in which the election issue was now centrally placed, see "Board Orders Speedy Strike Vote: Donoghue to Select Day Upon Arrival," *Minneapolis Journal*, 16 August 1934; "Labor Board Man Arrives to Rule Strike Election," *Minneapolis Journal*, 17 August 1934; "Objections Hold Up Vote Rules: Strike Chiefs Call Proposed Election Fake," *Minneapolis Journal*, 18 August 1934.

182 The EAC and the Citizens' Alliance refused to concede, even in the face of demonstrations of tens of thousands of workers and pitched battles between masses of strikers and various forces of authority in July – August 1934, that there were more than a few hundred workers involved. The claim remained that there were "only 309 workers actively on strike." See Citizens' Alliance, "The So-Called Truck Drivers' Strike," *Special Weekly Bulletin*, 3 August 1934, in File: "Miscellaneous Papers, 1934, 1936," Box 1, CRW Papers, MNHS.

ity were never formally struck by the General Drivers' Union. Strong and the Citizens' Alliance knew that in the many small firms with few union members the vote would almost certainly go against the General Drivers' Union. Even if Local 574's core goals were won (a minimum hourly wage of 50 cents for drivers and 42 cents for helpers, with arbitration boards only allowed to make adjustments *upwards*; union recognition; and the right to represent all of its members, including inside workers), employers could claim that many workers did not want to be represented by the union.

The General Drivers' Union insisted that before any elections occurred, there must be a written agreement governing the establishment of arbitration boards. Local 574 also petitioned Governor Olson to involve union members from a select list of strikers in monitoring truck movements under the permit system and continued to advocate a two-day General Strike protest by all organized labor in support of the strikers. Pickets incarcerated in the workhouse and military stockade, now disparagingly referred to as "Olson's Resort," waged a hunger strike to protest their confinement and conditions.¹⁸³

The Organizer proved a valuable tool for the membership of Local 574, not only in keeping the ranks apprised of the nefarious actions of the trucking firms, but also to alert them as to the more subtle schemes by which "friends of labor" like Olson and the federal mediators sought to undercut the union. Donoghue could follow the essential thinking of both capital and labor by comparing the coverage of the conflict and its settlement procedures in the mainstream press and the workers' strike bulletin. The federal mediator's understanding of what needed doing in Minneapolis was framed, in part, by *The Organizer*, which proclaimed in bold headlines: "**No Union Man to Participate in Any Election Unless Union Agrees to It: Bosses Preparing Election Fake by Threats and Tricks.**" Cannon captured something of the surprising suddenness with which the "man from Washington" put together terms that, in

183 The above paragraphs draw on "Strikers Ask Authority to Check Trucks," *Minneapolis Journal*, 19 August 1934; "Two Day General Strike Asked: Truckers Seek Sympathy Tie-Up," *Minneapolis Journal*, 20 July 1934; Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 161–162; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 165; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 178–180; Tselos, "The Labor Movement of Minneapolis in the 1930s," 259–265; "All Unions Asked to Support 574 by 2-Day General Demonstration Strike," and "Bring Up the Labor Reserves," *The Organizer*, 18 August 1934; "Members Meet Tuesday: 574 Will not Stand for Fake Elections," "Strike Body Will Report on Elections," and "Market Open All Morning – Olson Again Breaks His Promise; Troops and Loading," *The Organizer*, 20 August 1934; "Late Flash: All Prisoners of Olson's Militia Hit Conditions by Hunger Strike," "How About Leaders," "Union Busters Busted," *The Organizer*, 21 August 1934; "Stockade Dance," *The Organizer*, 12 September 1934.

Vincent Ray Dunne's view, gave Local 574 "substantially what we have fought and bled for since the beginning of the strike." In retrospect, Dobbs was a bit more reserved, suggesting, "Although the settlement provided much less than the workers deserved, it was as much as we could get at the time." Cannon considered that, in any case, Donoghue "obviously learned from the sad experiences" of his counterparts Haas and Dunningan "not to try any shenanigans." Instead, he "got right down to business and in a few days worked out a settlement which was a substantial victory for the union."¹⁸⁴

On Monday, 20 August 1934, Donoghue presented his election/settlement package to Local 574's negotiators, Farrell Dobbs and Vincent Ray Dunne, both of whom were centrally involved in the CLA's informal strike committee discussions about the viability of the strike. Dobbs and Dunne were caught off guard by how favorable the terms were to the union, surprised by Donoghue's insistence that he convinced Strong to "call off the fight." The small negotiating team of two and the larger Committee of 100 agreed to recommend acceptance of the terms of settlement and the future Labor Board-run elections. A ratification meeting was called for Tuesday evening, 21 August 1934. A final settlement piece fell into place when a small delegation of strikers visited Governor Olson and secured from him a commitment to release all 167 pickets confined in the military stockade.¹⁸⁵

Minneapolis awoke on Wednesday, 22 August 1934, to the unexpected news that the strike was over. "Martial Rule Ends, Troops Go Today," read the bold headline of the *Minneapolis Journal*. The subheadings explained how the 36 intense days of class struggle came to an abrupt and unexpected halt: "Finish of 5-Week Walkout Comes with Startling Swiftiness on Concessions by Both Sides; Board to Decide Date for Employee Elections; Employers will Take Back Men Regardless of Activities – Voting to Be by Firms." The Employers' Advisory Committee voted 155–3 in favor of the settlement. Local 574, despite a minority that favored the continuation of the struggle until all of the union's demands

184 "No Union Man to Participate in Any Elections Unless Union Agrees to It: Bosses Preparing Election Fake By Threats and Tricks," *The Organizer*, 21 August 1934; Walker, *American City*, 218–219; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 165; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 179.

185 Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 161–162; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 178–180; Walker, *American City*, 221; "Fought for All Workers: Dunne Says Unionism Gains Victory," "dere emily," and "The Settlement Terms," *The Organizer*, 22 August 1934; "F. of L. Hails End of City's Truck Strike," *Minneapolis Journal*, 22 August 1934. Olson did not make good immediately on his commitment to release the pickets from the stockade. In September those still under guard in the makeshift military prison held a dance: "Stockade Dance," *The Organizer*, 12 September 1934.

were won, followed the recommendation of its negotiating team of Dobbs and Dunne and the larger Committee of 100 that the Donoghue strike settlement terms be accepted.

The Citizens' Alliance was silent, nursing resentments that would fester for some time. "If we had only held out for a few days, we would have won," one of their strategists told Charles Rumford Walker two years later. E.G. Hall, President of the Minnesota State Federation of Labor, grouched that, "The leadership in the Minneapolis truck strike had caused turmoil by seeking to include other crafts in the drivers' union, and by promising the impossible." This of course was just sour grapes, but in a hint of things to come Hall also suggested that the AFL was gearing up for a fight against "communistic tendencies" in the labor movement. For the truckers and their many allies, the taste of victory was sweet indeed. Local 574 rank-and-file strikers held a jubilant "victory 'celebration' that lasted for twelve hours."¹⁸⁶

In several articles in *The Organizer* Cannon assessed what Local 574 won and what remained to be achieved. He saluted the fighting spirit of the strikers, who successfully overcame staunch opposition from the employers. Militant unionists beat back the bosses, but also battled diverse opponents on a variety of fronts, among them a reactionary mayor and a progressive governor, a hardline police chief and thousands of cops and "special deputies," the National Guard, a bevy of federal mediators, and the officialdom of a local Labor Board. The refusal of the union leadership and striking workers to be cowed heralded the dawn of a new day for American labor. At the Eagles Hall, where the strikers ratified the settlement, Cannon claimed "the walls ... shook ... with the fighting song of 574, 'Solidarity Forever.'" In response to Mayor Bainbridge's petulant last shot across the General Drivers' Union bow, "serving notice here and now that our fight on communism has just begun," pledging "to rid our city of those who defy law and order [and] seek only to tear down our government," Cannon offered a counter-pledge:

Mayor Bainbridge has started to yap about driving 'Communists' out of the city. We know what he means. He means framing up every worker who fights for his rights. ... We warn all enemies of labor: Local 574 is going to take a hand in the fight against any kind of frame-up.

186 The above paragraphs draw on Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 161; Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 184; Walker, *American City*, 219–220; "Martial Law Ends, Troops go Today ...," *Minneapolis Journal*, 22 August 1934.

Cannon called on all workers in the trucking sector to rally around 574 and, in the forthcoming Labor Board elections, “roll up such an overwhelming vote for the union that the question [of union affiliation] can not be raised again.”¹⁸⁷ In the lead-up to the Labor Board vote to determine representation, Local 574 examined vigilantly every element of the election procedures. Articles in *The Organizer* pointed to a variety of employer tricks: the padding of payroll lists with ineligible office workers and salesmen; excising union men from lists of eligible voters; and placing names of union members on the slates of company unions competing with the General Drivers’ Union for representation votes. Mass meetings on the Parade Grounds and at the Eagles Hall continued to draw crowds of thousands of workers who were interested in staying abreast of developments.¹⁸⁸

When the votes were finally counted, both sides declared victory. The Minneapolis daily press eagerly reported that workers only voted for the union in a minority of the 166 firms covered by the election. Therefore, the Employers’ Advisory Committee was declared the unequivocal victor, the conclusion being drawn that the workers rejected the General Drivers’ Union in most firms. As coverage in *The Organizer* made clear, however, capital’s “mathematical acrobatics” obscured some basic realities, all of which reflected trade union victories rather than defeats. Trucking employers made the election results into a statement of “vote by firm,” but this construction, as well as the list of 166 local businesses, was the creation of the Citizens’ Alliance. For Local 574, “Representation by firms was not the issue.” Some 21 of the 166 firms held no vote, most likely because some of these firms failed during the strike, or the number of workers employed was exceedingly small and the bosses intimidated them to such an extent that no ballots were even cast. In 15 firms, most of them again quite small, the barely more than 100 votes registered resulted in a declared tie between Local 574 and the Employers’ Advisory Committee as the repres-

187 Cannon certainly wrote “Victory! Settlement Goes Through!” *The Organizer*, 22 August 1934; as well as “What the Union Means,” *The Organizer*, 23 August 1934, reprinted in *Notebook of an Agitator*, 92–94. See as well “Workers Will Vote for 574: Ballot to be Secret – All Out!” *The Organizer*, 23 August 1934, and for a more general statement on the significance of the Minneapolis events, Herbert Solow, “574’s Struggle Has Great Significance for U.S. Labor,” *The Organizer*, 25 August 1934.

188 “Ballot Shows Two Tickets: Workers Should Get Registry Checks,” and “We Declare Independence,” *The Organizer*, 24 August 1934; “Instructions for Voters,” “Bosses Draw Phony Lists: ‘Fixing’ Will be Prevent – Union Takes Steps Against Fraud,” “6000 Mass at Parade Rally: Workers Turn Out at 574’s Call,” and “What the Elections Mean,” *The Organizer*, 25 August 1934; “Tonight’s Meeting Public,” and “Brown Sure 574 Will Win,” *The Organizer*, 27 August 1934.

entative voice of the workers. Under the rules of the Labor Board election the union secured the right to represent those workers in such deadlocked firms who voted for the General Drivers' Union and joined its ranks. The employers won the vote in 68 firms, and the General Drivers' Union, Local 574, was chosen by a majority of workers at 62 companies. What allowed Local 574 to claim victory was that an absolute majority of votes cast – 724 of 1362, or 53 percent – went for the union side of the ballot. While this total was low due to the disfranchisement of many strikers, it was obviously much higher than the mere 309 workers the Citizens' Alliance claimed participated in the July – August 1934 strike.

More importantly, workers at the larger firms voted decisively in favor of the union. Among the major trucking firms located in the Market District, which were always the primary focus of the General Drivers' Union's organizing drive, Local 574 won 69 percent of the votes cast. Given that the first strike launched in May 1934 targeted only eleven key firms, the union accomplished much in four months, coming out of the secret ballot elections with representation rights in 77 individual firms. It also secured a toehold in the trucking sector in scores of small firms, where workers affiliated with the union were now steeled in the solidarity of class struggle even if in their particular company they were a minority.¹⁸⁹ As the *Minneapolis Labor Review* concluded in the immediate aftermath of the August settlement: "Winning of this strike marks the greatest victory in the annals of the local trade union movement. ... It has changed Minneapolis from being known as a scab's paradise to being a city of hope for those who toil."¹⁹⁰

Many described the teamsters' desperate struggles during 1934 as a "civil war." In this dramatic contest, James P. Cannon emphasized the most critical element. "In Minneapolis we saw the native militancy of the workers fused with a politically conscious leadership," he wrote. "Minneapolis showed how great can be the role of such leadership. It gave great promise for the party founded on correct political principles and fused and united with the mass of American workers. In that combination one can see the power that will conquer the

189 See, for instance, a number of articles in *The Organizer*, including "Elections Clinch Victory: Market Solid for 574," and "574 Protests Used," 5 September 1934; "Local 574 Wins Majority: Daily Press Buries Truth," 12 September 1934. Note that with respect to arbitration, Trotsky would later outline, in his discussion of a transitional program for class struggle militants in the unions, how critical it is to fight "uncompromisingly against any attempt to subordinate the unions to the bourgeois state and bind the proletariat to 'compulsory arbitration' and every other form of police guardianship" See Trotsky, *Transitional Program*, 77–78.

190 Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, 190, quoting *Minneapolis Labor Review*.

world.” This vision of the significance of 1934’s class struggles in Minneapolis combined with a realistic appreciation of the actual state of working-class political awareness, aspiration, and organization:

The strike was understood to be a preliminary, partial struggle with the objective of establishing the union and compelling the bosses to ‘recognize’ it. When they got that they stopped and called it a day. The strong union that has emerged from the strike will be able to fight again and to protect its membership in the meantime. The accomplishment is modest enough. But if we want to play an effective part in the labor movement, we must not allow ourselves to forget that the American working class is just beginning to move on the path of class struggle and, in its great majority, stands yet before the first task of establishing stable unions. Those who understand and accomplish it prepare the future.

The victory in Minneapolis was the result of a fusion of class-conscious leadership and a militant rank-and-file. “In other places ... strike militancy surged from below and was checked and restrained by the leaders. ... In Minneapolis it was organized and directed by the leaders. ... [who] taught the workers to fight for their rights and fought with them.” Yet this “spirit of determined struggle was combined at the same time with a realistic appraisal of the relation of forces and the limited objectives of the fight.” Without this balance of audacity and sobriety, Cannon concluded, “all the preparations and all the militancy of the strikers might well have been wasted and brought the reaction of a crushing defeat.” In reflecting on the upturn in class struggle across the United States in 1934, Cannon pointed proudly to the achievement in Minneapolis:

There a group of determined militants, armed with the most advanced political conceptions, organized the workers in the trucking industry, led them through three strikes within six months and remain today at the head of the union. It was this fusion of the native militancy of the American workers, common to practically all of the strikes of this year, with a leadership equal to its task that made the strikes of a few thousand workers of a single local union events of national, even international, prominence: a shining example for the whole labor movement. ... What miracles will the workers in the great industries be capable of when they forge a leadership of the Minneapolis caliber!

A Minneapolis striker and a Committee of 100 member developed a similar, succinct analysis of what was significant about the 1934 Minneapolis class war.

He drew on a military metaphor. "The rank-and-file was really the power of the whole movement, but they still needed that leadership to lead them," recalled Moe Hirk. "I don't care how good the army is, without a general they're no good." And the generals who directed the Minneapolis teamsters' strikes were Trotskyists.¹⁹¹

Cannon returned to New York in early September 1934 and delivered a Sunday evening lecture at Irving Plaza entitled "The Message of Minneapolis." Invigorated by his time on the front lines of class struggle, Cannon threw himself into the work of advancing and consolidating the nucleus of a new revolutionary Party. Promising opportunities presented themselves in 1934–36, allowing Jim Cannon and the small but growing corps of Trotskyists aligned with him and electrified by victories such as those achieved in Minneapolis to make the leap into new political possibilities. In the process, Cannon and his comrades left behind old limitations and embraced the exciting prospect of enhancing revolutionary initiative in the United States.¹⁹²

191 Cannon quotes in the above paragraph from James P. Cannon, "Minneapolis and Its Meaning," *New International*, 1 (July 1934), 3–5; Cannon, "The Message of Minneapolis," *The Militant*, 15 September 1934; Cannon, "The Strike Wave and the Left Wing," *New International*, 1 (September – October 1934), 67–68; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 167. Moe Hirk is quoted in Korth, *Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934*, 184. See also "An Interview with the Managing Editor of the Minneapolis Truck Drivers' Strike Bulletin," *The Militant*, 15 September 1934; Walker, *American City*, 219–220.

192 Cannon's Irving Plaza speech, "The Message of Minneapolis," appeared in *The Militant*, 15 September 1934. It is likely Cannon left Minneapolis around 5 September 1934, as did Herbert Solow. See "Solow Returns to New York," *The Organizer*, 5 September 1934.

WORKERS OF THE WORLD
UNITE!

the new International

JULY
1934

CONTENTS

LEON TROTSKY

The Testament of Lenin

The Minneapolis Strike

The Convention of the Socialist Party

The Soviets and the League of Nations

New Trends Under the New Deal

Friedrich Engels on Bimetallism

Strikes and the Economic Cycle

Book Reviews of Eastman, Celine,
Bauer, Deutsch, Mumford

Etc., Etc.

15¢

A MONTHLY ORGAN OF REVOLUTIONARY MARXISM

PUBLICATION 1 New International, July 1934

Semi-Monthly Organ of the Opposition Group in the Workers (Communist) Party of America.

"It is necessary that every member of the Party should study calmly and with the greatest objectivity, first the substance of the differences of opinion, and then the development of the struggles within the Party. Neither the one nor the other can be done unless the documents of both sides are published. He who takes somebody's word for it is a hopeless idiot, who can be disposed of with a single gesture of the hand."—Lenin

NEW YORK, N. Y., NOVEMBER 15, 1928

PRICE 5 CENTS

Against Opportunism and Bureaucracy in the Workers Communist Party of America!

1. In the view of the necessity of concentrating the full attention of the Party on the election campaign, we have refrained up till now from any statement or step calculated to open a Party discussion on disputed questions until the election campaign will have been ended and the pre-convention discussion opened.

On October 27 the undersigned members of the Central Executive Committee were declared expelled from the Party for the views expressed in our statement to the Political Committee on the same date, which is printed below. This action, taken by the Political Committee in violation of the Party constitution, without even the formality of a meeting of the Central Executive Committee to which we were elected by the Party convention, was designed to deprive the Party members of the oppor-

mental correctness of the document. It merely demonstrates the political instability of these leaders which hampers the process of developing an opposition to the present right wing leadership and line of the Party on a principle basis. We have no doubt that the supporters of the Opposition who have regarded the struggle against the

BACKING THE HOTEL STRIKE, OUR MILITANT APPEARS 3 TIMES A WEEK

THE MILITANT



VOLUME VII, NO. 4, [WHOLE NO. 203]

NEW YORK, MONDAY, JANUARY 29, 1934.

PRICE 1 CENT

LEON TROTSKY
Towards the Catastrophe

In view of the increasing tension in the Far East, we are presenting reprinting an important extract from the corrected version of comrade Leon Trotsky's recent article on Japan and the Soviet Union.—Ed.

1. The Myth of Invincibility.
Manifestly, the ruling classes of

'Ballyhoo' Won't Cook Dinners

Here are some of the most important of the 50 hotels and restaurants on strike:

Waldorf-Astoria, New Weston
Aster, Lincoln, Barbizon Plaza
Sherry-Netherlands, Savoy Plaza
5th Ave., Emex House, Colorado
Club, Casino de Fares, L'Herminier
N. Y. Athletic Club, St. Moritz
Pierre, Brezlin, Ambassador Room
Eiffel, Brevoy, Montclair, Lafayette
Hotel, Biltmore, Ritz Tower, Madison
Ave., Great Northern, Lexington
Park Central, Barclay, La Rue
(settled). Central Park Casino

20,000 Out

These are the demands of the Amalgamated Food Workers Union and this is why thousands of men and women have slammed the sweat shop kitchen doors behind them in the biggest strike New York hotels have ever known. The demands are plain enough, fair enough, to get the unanimous endorsement and

Fifty of City's Most Important Hotels Successfully Struck by Amalgamated Food Workers

*The general strike is sweeping the hotels from one end of New York to the other. This report of success can already be made when the strike is not yet three days old and the wave has hardly reached its peak."

Bryan D. Palmer - 978-90-04-47152-8

WORKERS
OF THE
WORLD.
UNITE

THE MILITANT

Weekly Organ of the Communist League of America

VOLUME VII, NO. 36 [WHOLE NO. 234]

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, JULY 28, 1934

PRICE 2 CENTS

TROOPS RULE MINNEAPOLIS Police Arrest Cannon and Shachtman

WAR LOOMS AS POWERS CLASH OVER AUSTRIA

Central Europe was charged with the dynamite of a new world war when the Nazis' unassisted defiance in an unsuccessful move to restore the boundaries of Hitlerian rule to Austria.

VICTIM DENOUNCES POLICE LIES

Simon Baruch, badly wounded by police thugs yesterday, is now in General Hospital, where he issued the following statement: "The outrage I published in last night's Star, that I told the police that Communist party leaders said I would get a good job if I joined the strike, I wish to refute absolutely. I made no statement to the press or to police stenographers beyond giving my name and address. I have talked to no Communist party

40,000 Join Mass Funeral for Harry Ness

(Reprinted from The Organizer, July 25, 1934)
One of the most solemn and impressive gatherings ever witnessed in the city of Minneapolis, was seen when 40,000 workmen and wo-

Rush Funds for Cannon-Shachtman Defense

Comrades Shachtman and Cannon have been arrested by the Minneapolis police, the first victims of the terrible "red" baiting campaign unleashed by the bosses. In this we witness once more the celebrated frame-up methods of American capitalism hitting directly at the Communist League. But in its essence it is a part of the general efforts to break the truck drivers' strike and if possible to crush their splendid fighting union.
The strike is solid. No trucks move. But the bosses bring into play their most deadly weapons: the frame-up, armed police attacks and martial law.
Help is needed to defend our comrades against this dastardly frame-up. Rush funds immediately to the Militant office.

Drivers Ranks Solid Despite Provocation

(By Wire)
MINNEAPOLIS, July 25.—With the declaration of martial law, Minneapolis police began a heart-breaking red-baiting and arrested Com-

PUBLICATION 4 The Militant, 28 July 1934

NEW MILITANT

Weekly Organ of the Workers Party of the U. S.

VOL. I, NO. 5

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, JANUARY 12, 1935

PRICE 3 CENTS

Roosevelt's Speech Goes On Forever

Has Made It Many Times
and Conditions Go from
Bad to Worse

By DAN DEANAY
The President's speech to Congress was his Christmas gift to the American workers. Like a good holiday Christmas gives the President feels that he has done his duty for the year, and can afford to forget the workers until the next Christmas comes around.
"We agree," he said, "that the conditions in which proper security, a reasonable leisure, and a decent living is no condition to be preferred to great wealth and power."
Like most politicians, it finally appears, President Roosevelt has exactly one speech to make; he made it at his inauguration, he

Warnick Is Released on \$3,200 Bail

Sacramento Labor Prisoners
Helped by Non-Partisan
Labor Defense

(NPLD Press Service)
SACRAMENTO, Jan. 6.—Jack Warnick, one of the leaders of the agricultural workers of the Sacramento and Imperial valleys, on trial with eighteen others here under the notorious Criminal Syndicate act, was today released on \$3,200 bail provided by the Presidential Committee for Non-Partisan Labor Defense. The trial has been postponed until January 16. The jury has already been selected.
"I expect to prosecute the Communists vigorously,"
With this proclamation, Otto D. Babcock, newly-elected District Attorney of Sacramento County, con-



A. J. MENTE



JAMES P. CANNON

Workers Party Leaders Off on Speaking Tour

The first national tour of the national office has requested speech. Workers Party which opens Jan. 17.

Strike Shuts Garages in Twin Cities

2,000 Mechanics Out, Get
Help from Drivers
Union 574

(By Special Correspondent)
MINNEAPOLIS.—With winter headwinds in both cities functioning like clockwork, with committees set up and serving hot food, with music played from creches, the streets in good old style reminiscent of General Dyer's Union Local 574 last summer, the striking workers in garage Mechanics Union No. 574 in Minneapolis and No. 459 in St. Paul have got the Twin City garages tied up tight. Today (Tuesday) the first strike bulletin will make its appearance on the streets of the two cities. If events demand it, the bulletin will appear daily until the strikers are reinstated.

FDR Advocates Low Wage, Protects Private Industry, In Dealing with Unemployed

150 League Men Storm
Town Hall in Michigan
Federal Relief Must Stop
He Tells Congress—What
Does It Mean?

"TEMPERANCE, Mich.—One hundred jobless workers under the banner of the newly organized Monroe County Unemployed League stormed the town hall in Bedford Township and forced the relief as hostilities to grant immediate clothing, bedding, and increased food rations to the unemployed and bedridden and Eric Township.
When Duesene, the case worker in Bedford Township, refused to grant a coal order to Homer Alston, member of the Temperance League, and told him openly that if he wanted coal he should go and steal it, the U. L. committee of it, headed by Jack Miller of the Eric U. L., proceeded to put Du-

PUBLICATION 5 New Militant, 12 January 1935

NEW MILITANT

VOL. 1, NO. 32

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, AUGUST 3, 1935

PRICE 3 CENTS

Open Letter to All Revolutionary Working Class Organizations & Groups

The Workers Party of the U. S. participates this week in an

within the party and in the trade unions have degenerated to the marrow of their bones. Their personal interests and their patriotic views blind them to the bourgeoisie

imperialism, publicly renounced the American Communists. This party corrupted by a decade of unprincipled maneuvers and liquidationist compromises with parties (German

In Austria and Spain, the Communist International, despite extremely favorable circumstances, failed not only to create an organization in the least influential, but systematic

NEW MILITANT

VOL. 2, NO. 17 WHOLE NO. 691

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, MAY 2, 1936

PRICE 3 CENTS

Tasks of the Fourth International in Spain

A Letter to a Spanish Comrade
By Leon Trotsky

[illegible]

The Removal of Zamora

What is the meaning of the removal of President Zamora? That the political developments have now really entered into an acute stage. Zamora was, to say the least, a constant center of the ruling masses. Under altered conditions he played the same role that Hindenburg enacted in Germany for a certain period of time; it was during the time when the reaction (even the reaction of the left) against the Social Democrats was at its height, that his home in Bonn, the Brenner, was the headquarters of the

"WE HAVE BEEN NAUGHT, WE SHALL BE ALL!"



Peoples Front Salvages Bankrupt Radicals in First French Election

**Real Issues Will Be
Decided in Streets
Not By Ballot Box**

Jersey Jobless Ousted

Thousands Expected To March

Bourbon Politicians In-
flirt Final Injury
On Unemployed

New York Parade Will
Mark High Point
In Many Years

New Jersey capitalist politicians ordered the jobless demonstrators out of the legislature, their final slap in the face to the unemployed of the state. After tossing the interests of the unemployed between

Democrats and stoppage while relief payments stopped dead and suffering was widespread, the politicians decided to adjourn and do nothing.

The Workers Alliance of New Jersey, rallied its forces and marched then into the Assembly halls of

In New York, where a more inclusive united front of political and labor organizations than has been seen for years, a monster parade will take place. New York will be decked in red, its streets will resound with the marching tread of labor's legions.

Beginning at various points in heart of the city, the parade will march through lower Fifth Ave., previously denied by the police and converge on Union Square.

This the capitalist politicians must have realized as they scurried back to Trenton from the banquet tables in their luxurious homes and yachts.

Bombous to the marrow, the politicians returned, muttering the no-

In Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, San Francisco and all the great industrial centers of the country, workers will march or demonstrate in meetings against capitalist oppression.

Shorter hours, more adequate relief, social insurance, freedom for class war prisoners and struggle for a workers' world will appear on thousands of banners and be shouted from thousands of proletarian throats.

Resentment they listened to the spokesmen for the unemployed, concerned only with finding a convenient pretext to oust them from the assembly. The Hoffmans who could find a hundred methods for

winning publicity in the Hauptman case, could not find a single method to feed the unemployed. "Shall we rob Peter (read: rich) to pay Paul (read: poor) asks the Governor? Never, the assemblyman chorused.

Let us rob Paul to pay Paul!" And this was the solution. Before the assembly ended its deliberations, it empowered a committee under Governor Hoffman to find "ways and means." This means

But before the assemblymen

Law'n'Order Cops Maul
Ruse Flops Guildsmen

Akron Vigilante Frame-up
On Trade Unionists

Real Issues Will Be Decided in Streets Not By Ballot Box

Bryan D. Palmer - 978-90-04-47152-8

People's Front Moves to Cripple Strike Movement in France

See Page Four

NEW MILITANT

Official Organ of the Workers Party of the U.S.

VOL. 2, NO. 22 [WHOLE NO. 74]

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, JUNE 6, 1936

PRICE 3 CENTS

Workers Party Calls All Revolutionary Workers to Join the Socialist Party

THE Cleveland convention of the Socialist Party finally smashed the Old Guard domination, and the Old Guard withdrew. By rejecting the Old Guard, the convention ratified the slogan of an inclusive, democratic party, open to all who stand for the goal of socialism and who are willing to work loyally within the framework of the party.

From these two significant developments we draw

Statement of National Committee

Roosevelt camp; comfortable, aging Philistines, stern and implacable only against revolutionaries and militants,—for a decade and a half these traitors poured their poison into the minds and hearts of Socialist workers. The socialist worker, seeking a way out from capitalism, could find guidance, in all those years, only in the vernal and corrupt Jewish Forward or its English version, the New Leader. The worker or student

PUBLICATION 8 New Militant, 6 June 1936

DAILY STRIKE BULLETIN

UNITED
LABOR
ACTION

THE ORGANIZER



TWO TWENTY-FIVE

SOUTH THIRD STREET

SMASH THE
CITIZENS
ALLIANCE

Volume I, No. 9

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA, SATURDAY, JULY 21, 1934

Price one cent

Workers Blood Is Shed Johannes The Butcher Uses Shotguns To Mow Down 48 Unarmed Workingmen

The blood of workers ran freely in the streets of Minneapolis yesterday.

They were shot down and wounded by the uniformed thugs commanded by Police Chief Michael Johannes, by Johannes the Murderer, in the name of the city administration and at the behest of its master, the Citizens Alliance.

Forty-eight sons of the working class were mowed down by shot guns in the hands of police.

They were shot down though they were defenseless and unarmed, like animals in a trap.

They were shot in the back by base cowards who dared not shoot them in the face.

It was no battle that took place on Third Street North yesterday. It was a massacre. A cunningly conceived, diabolically planned and cold-bloodedly executed massacre.



Look again at the photographs. See the crumpled, riddled bodies of two strikers on the floor of their truck, while all around them stand blue-coated monsters with shotguns. On the floor of their truck, from which they had never descended. They were shot down where they stood, before they could lift a finger in action.

They never had a chance.

But these are men! These are lion-hearted! The first detachment quivers and falls under the withering fire of the police. Then, to the aid of their fallen brothers, from the ranks of other strikers and workers sympathetic with their cause, comes a second wave rolling right into the jaws of the shotguns. But they too must give way before the murderous fire.

How proud the police must be of their triumph! And haven't they

PUBLICATION 9 The Organizer, 21 July 1934

ALL OUT PROTEST MEETING

TONIGHT at 8
THE KNOLL
Parade Grounds

DAILY STRIKE BULLETIN

UNITED
LABOR
ACTION

THE ORGANIZER



TWO TWENTY-FIVE

SOUTH THIRD STREET

SMASH THE
CITIZENS
ALLIANCE

Volume 1, No. 12

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA, FRIDAY, JULY 27, 1934

Price one cent

Martial Law Cloaks Scab Moves

Petitions Laid Before Council By Two Groups

50,000 Endorse Union's Move Against Johannes

This morning two petitions were presented to the City Council. One, circulated by Local 574 and presented by Alderman Ed Hudson, had over 50,000 signatures affixed.

It asked the impeachment of the Mayor and the Chief of Police. The second, representing a large group of private citizens, also asked that the Mayor be removed, charging him with a number of misdeeds.

A motion was made by Alderman Scott to appoint a committee of five to investigate the Mayor. A substitute motion that this petition be laid on the table was passed by a vote of



STILL IN THE FIELD

574 Protests Guards' Effect On City Tie-up

Bosses Once More Turn Down Haas Proposals

Grasping at the provisions of the martial law edict of the newly appointed military administration of the city, the labor-hating exploiters set a number of scab trucks in motion today.

The trucks moved under a variety of false banners such as signs claiming that they were moving interstate commerce. In most cases this was a fake. In several cases one box was addressed over the Wisconsin line and the rest of the load to Minneapolis and St. Paul stops. For a while they got through due to the interference with picketing by the

PUBLICATION 10 The Organizer, 27 July 1934

**UNITED
LABOR
ACTION**

THE ORGANIZER



**SMASH THE
CITIZENS
ALLIANCE**

VOLUME 1

TWO TWENTY-FIVE

SOUTH THIRD STREET

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA, WEDNESDAY, AUG. 22, 1934

NUMBER 37

VICTORY!

Settlement Goes Through!

The strike settlement adopted by the Union last night at a membership meeting is a victory for Local 574 and for the cause of trade unionism which was at stake in this strike.

The bosses, led by the Citizens Alliance, forced this strike on us. The Alliance bandits admit that they want to make this an open shop town. The beginning, they thought, would be to smash Local 574. Then they would go on to the rest of the Unions.

They have been defeated in their foul plot!

Battle-scarred and bleeding from many wounds, Local 574 rises from the struggle stronger in the confidence of the workers and



He Packs a Wallop!

could split us. We stuck it out and got a settlement which the whole labor movement will approve.

Thus the strike ends. But the struggle does not end.

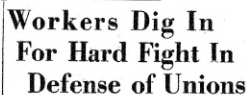
Elections are coming. Local 574 wants to win in every house. Every worker should join the Union. Every union man should speak to his brothers on the job and see to it that 574 gets a unanimous vote. After that we shall remain vigilant and see that all conditions of the settlement are enforced in practice. Local 574 is not going to sleep at the switch.

Let's get out the vote and let's see to it that every ballot cast is marked for 574 a real union

PUBLICATION 11 The Organizer, 22 August 1934

MARITIME STRIKE DEADLOCK

Soviet Denies Charge It Ships Spain Arms



The end of the fourth week of the maritime strike on the Pacific Coast finds all shipping completely tied up and the situation still frozen in a deadlock. No definite signs of an early settlement are in sight. The ship owners have made no moves toward settlement, and the workers are not moving any ships. So great, in fact, is the solidarity of the workers, welded together in the Maritime Federation, that the shipowners have not even attempted, as yet, to move a single ship.

Bomb Homes Of Workers In Tire City

Terror Campaign Fails to Stop Growth Of Rubber Union

The Maritime Strike

(EDITORIAL)

(EDITORIAL)

PUBLICATION 12 Labor Action, 28 November 1936

R.R. Unions Ask Wage Increases

On January 8th the Journal of Commerce reported that although in its formal report to Congress the Maritime Commission had made no recommendations for further legislation (obviously because of fear of adverse publicity after its farcical "investigation" of the Maritime situation had been exposed by waterfront unions), the Commission nevertheless is advising Senators Copeland and Bland as to how the present act should be "liberalized and clarified" for the purpose of strengthening their means of enforcement.

Five Brotherhoods Present Joint Demands

the crane, which almost became deadlocked at times, was around the question of percentage or flat increases in the basic scale. The engineers and conductors, higher paid aristocrats of the running trades, stood out for the percentage increase demanded.

Meanwhile, financial journals show that the railroad companies are easily able to pay the increase demanded. Characterizing the preliminary reports of rail-

Victory For

Lenin Memorial, 1937 . . . By Carlo



Roosevelt Shows Colors to Labor In Automobile Crisis

Lewis' Reminder of Election Obligations Is Curtly Dismissed by President As Auto Strike Spreads

While General Motors plants employing 125,000 men lay idle and the ever-widening circles of the country's biggest auto strike reached the shores of San Francisco bay, "Labor's friend" in the White House showed his capitalist colors this week.

John L. Lewis addressed an appeal to the President—and got a quick reply. "This is no time for neutrality," said Lewis, "and this is not time for passivity. We have informed the administration, through the Secretary of Labor, that all workers join the economic revolution, the Duponts and the Stoenes contrabuted their money and used their energy to drive the President out of the White House. He asked labor to come to his aid and labor helped repel the attack."

Force Reinstatement And Get Wage Increases

DETROIT -- The five day sit-down strike of the Michigan Tool Co. ended this Thursday, when one hundred of the inside men and four hundred Michigan Tool employees on the outside voted

INTERVENTION ASKED
"Is it time for the President to intervene?" Lewis was asked. "Labor intervened for the Presi-

SOCIALIST APPEAL

Published Weekly as the Organ of the Socialist Party of New York, Left Wing Branches.

Vol. 1. - No. 9.

401

Saturday October 9, 1937

5 Cents per Copy

Nominate James P. Cannon for Mayor In New York Municipal Campaign

Trotsky Sees Jap Blow-up

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS PUT BY MR. J. P. MCKNIGHT OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS REGARDING THE FAR EASTERN SITUATION

By Leon Trotsky

1) An actual and serious victory of Japan over China would signify the forcing out of Great Britain from China, hermetically sealed doors for the United States and a direct threat to the Soviet Far East and, in the next stage, a threat to French Indo-China and to Holland's island's I do not believe, however, in the possibility of the execution of this plan. As I have written, Japan, once in the past 10 years, the first great war will end in the greatest social catastrophe for Japan.

Blow-up Threatens Japan

2) The Empire of the Mikado contains within it all the social contradictions which, in its time, exploded the Czarist Empire: half-feudal agrarian relations; a monarchy by "divine right"; terrible poverty of the people; a tight internal market for industry; a monstrous growth of the military budget; a military caste which reflects in itself all the inner contradictions of the country, and so forth, and so forth.

3) The masses of Japanese soldiers reflect the deep dissatisfaction of the Japanese peasants and workers. In the beginning of the war, the chauvinists wave will, as always, seize the whole army but the reaction to it will not be long in waiting.

4) Great Britain could not, in

the more honest, gifted, critically thinking representatives. Stalin systematically exterminates them through the GPU. The bureaucracy has become the chief hindrance to the economic and cultural development of the land. The hydra of dissatisfaction will therefore grow more and more heads. The regime of Stalin is doomed. A good deal of recent correspondence from Moscow, censored or "uncensored", tries to prove that the bloody purge "strengthened" the position of Stalin. The authors of these reports either understand nothing, or they understand too much. The external politics of Stalin are dictated not by the interests of the U.S.S.R. but by the concern or the self-preservation of the ruling caste. Stalin is retreating and will continue to retreat. War will tame the ruling bureaucratic caste. However, I do not doubt that the U.S.S.R. will emerge victorious from a war in the Far East.

Open Write-in Drive for Only Labor Candidate

On Sunday, October 3rd, Ernest R. McKinney, New York organizer of the Socialist Party (Left Wing) announced to the press that the Party had nominated James P. Cannon as its candidate for Mayor of New York. This action was the response of the revolutionary socialists in New York to the sell-out to the LaGuardia machine engineered by every other working class party in the City.

A campaign Committee headed by Alex Retzkin has been set up, and is already functioning on a city-wide basis. The campaign will be carried into every section of

Our Candidate



JAMES P. CANNON

Harry Milton on National Tour

Following the highly enthusiastic meeting held with Harry Milton in New York upon his return from Spain it has been decided

of New York, with street meetings, mass meetings, rallies, and distribution of literature. A comprehensive platform has been adopted, and will be issued as a popular pamphlet.

Only Labor Candidate

The nomination of Cannon places in the field the only working class candidate who will figure in this extremely important election. One by one, during the past months, the reformist parties and groups have capitulated to LaGuardia. Through the American Labor Party, formed last year, during the Roosevelt campaign in order to keep labor votes lined up for Roosevelt, the labor bureaucrats led the way. The Lovestonites followed shortly after. They Browder an the Communist Party. Finally, ten days ago, the procession ended when Norman Thomas, apostle of "socialism in our time," announced the withdrawal of his name from the list of candidates.

Meanwhile, the real character of the LaGuardia People's Front

New Crisis Hits People's Front Gov't in France

By Frank L. Demby

The rapidly approaching cantonal elections and the October 2 communique of the French cabinet serve once again to focus the eyes of the politically conscious on France. The long-smoldering crisis bids fair to break out into the open with far-reaching consequences for France and the entire world. P. J. Philip, Paris correspondent of the New York Times, described the recent cabinet meeting as having "altered the whole course along which France has been traveling since the Popular Front Government came into power fifteen months ago."

Signs of the coming crisis and indications as to its nature have

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Labor Leader Slain in Minneapolis

Coming Trials To Reveal Secret Plans of G.P.U. Stalinists Seek Frame-up of Leaders of Local 544

By Leon Trotsky

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In Two Sections
Section 1

Socialist Appeal

Official Weekly Organ of the Socialist Workers Party, Section of the Fourth International

See Section 2
for Documents of
World Congress

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175

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WORLD CONGRESS FOUNDS FOURTH INTERNATIONAL

Congress Climaxes 15 Years' Struggle

Fourth International Emerges From Fight Against Degeneration in the Third International

By MAX HIRSCHMAN
Just as the main body of the Communist International came out of the Second International at the roots of the Fourth International was the result of the long struggle of the Fourth International against the degeneration of the Third International.

Against Degeneration
Significantly enough, the first battle of the young group in the opposition centered around the struggle against degeneration and for party and proletarian democracy. These questions were, however, completely neglected in the views of the Opposition, with the exception of the industrialization of the country and the elimination of the Soviet power.

Against Degeneration
Significantly enough, the first battle of the young group in the opposition centered around the struggle against degeneration and for party and proletarian democracy. These questions were, however, completely neglected in the views of the Opposition, with the exception of the industrialization of the country and the elimination of the Soviet power.



Ten Years of the Fight To Build A Revolutionary Party in the US

By JAMES P. CANNON
The foundation congress of the Fourth International, which was held in London in 1928, was a landmark event in the history of the world movement for the liberation of the oppressed.

Thirty Delegates From Eleven Countries Raise New Banner

New International Created in Midst of European War Crisis Given Voice to Revolutionary Opposition to Imperialist War

YOUTH INTERNATIONAL FORMED

The Fourth International has been founded. Meeting in the midst of the threatening war crisis in Europe, 30 delegates from eleven countries proclaimed the new World Party of the Socialist Revolution. A Youth International was simultaneously created.

Unable to send delegates because of conditions of distance, illegality, and other adverse factors, were organizations affiliated to the Fourth International in Spain, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Indo-China, China, French Morocco, the Union of South Africa, Canada, a number of Latin American countries, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, Norway, Lithuania, Palestine, Rumania, and several other countries. These organizations had already signified in advance their adherence to the new banner.

NINE COUNTRIES REPRESENTED AT YOUTH CONGRESS

No conference of revolutionaries ever met under circumstances more tense and ominous or faced tasks of supreme historical gravity than did this one.

More than five years have passed since the nucleus at work for the reconstruction of the revolutionary International drew up a programmatic balance sheet of the humiliating defeat of the German proletariat which brought in the world, and of Europe in particular.

PUBLICATION 18 Socialist Appeal, 22 October 1938

Entryism

1 1934: Militancy and Marginalization's Movement

Eight months after Cannon brought the message of Minneapolis to New York's Irving Plaza he returned to the popular venue, addressing a large crowd on "Where the A. F. of L. is Going." His 12 May 1935 speech highlighted the "changes and shifts in the labor movement today," emphasizing the rapidity with which the working class was drawn into militant struggle. "If we do not say there is a revolt of the working class in process," Cannon argued, "at least here are plenty of signs, plenty of proofs, that the making of a real insurgence of the American workers is at hand."

Newly-organized automobile workers in Toledo, for instance, shut down the production of Chevrolet transmissions, grinding a pivotal sector of the nationwide industry to a halt, bringing 30,000 workers into the streets. The "dramatic onslaught" of "the Toledo vanguard upon the citadel of open-shoppery" carried on from the previous year's Toledo Auto-Lite battle, a struggle that witnessed picket lines 10,000 strong reinforced by the American Workers Party [AWP]-mobilized Unemployed League. Eventually this battle, as we have seen, spread to 19 auto-parts plants before a June 1934 settlement posed the possibility of unionization of the American automobile industry. Toledo's 1935 rank-and-file militancy, again fanned by the likes of revolutionaries such as AWP founder, A.J. Muste, was about to be undermined by American Federation of Labor [AFL] functionaries. Francis Dillon, an AFL national organizer, blew into Toledo and, upon being barred from a mass meeting of strikers, denounced those "who presume without authority to speak in the interests of the workers the language of a Soviet dictatorship." Threatening to expel the Toledo militants from the respectable American Federation of Labor, Dillon stomped out of a packed auditorium where a strike committee was recommending rejection of a "union-busting agreement." Railing against the "Reds" on the elected negotiating body, an enraged Dillon fumed: "Let Muste run their outfit. If they want an I.W.W. or a communist outfit let them have it. They're out! They're out! I disown them." With the support of the business agent of the insurgent local, who warned workers that their wives and children would suffer and go hungry if the union charter was lifted and picket lines kept in place, the AFL helped turn off the taps of class struggle in Toledo, and the strike petered out. Dillon was immediately dispatched to Flint, Michigan where, once again, he

played the anti-communist card to good effect in dampening down strike mobilization.

In Minneapolis, the Trotskyists who pioneered the great 1934 strike victories, and led International Brotherhood of Teamsters Local 574, faced an even more coercive threat from AFL boss Dan Tobin, who demanded immediate payment of dues the drivers' union had been unable to cover during its weeks of costly work stoppages and bloody street battles during the May – August conflicts. Tobin, oblivious to the price paid by Minneapolis workers, revoked the IBT/AFL charter of Local 574. The Trotskyist leadership refused to knuckle-under to Tobin's heavy-handedness and, with the backing of the Minneapolis Central Labor Union, fought the bureaucratic attempt to "outlaw" the local. It waged an intensified campaign to be reinstated and rejoined with "the International and the A.F. of L. unions generally."

Cannon championed this refusal to capitulate in his Irving Plaza address:

the movement of the masses into the A.F. of L. and the development of this mass movement into a militant movement on an industrial union basis, is not going to be accomplished smoothly. When the labor agents of the bosses, at the head of these A.F. of L. unions are unable any longer to head off the strike movement and to outwit the militants of the local organizations, they will resort to wholesale expulsion. They will begin to outlaw strikes A correct trade union policy is not possible in my opinion unless such an eventuality is pointed out and the answer given to it in advance.

Refusing to call for the creation of independent unions, outside of and against the American Federation of Labor, Cannon insisted that the revolutionary response was to fight for "trade union unity." In most cases this meant struggling to win support of the ranks of the AFL. But if a separate, autonomous union happened to exist and won to its banner significant numbers of workers, revolutionists had a duty to back it as a legitimately constituted workers' organization:

The fight for trade union unity, the fight for a revolutionary labor movement, has to be expressed at this moment, in this period, in the slogan, 'Deeper into the A.F. of L. unions'. We go where the masses are and win them for the revolution. That is the attitude of the Marxists. Now, one will ask, will you capture the American Federation of Labor for the revolution? We may not capture the apparatus, the treasury, the banks or the insurance companies, very probably we won't, but if we win the masses of the

workers we will have the movement and it is the movement that will make the revolution, not the label – and without the movement, represented by the workers in the trade unions, there is not going to be a revolution.

This was what the experience of the mass struggles in Toledo and Minneapolis taught, and from which Cannon drew one final conclusion. It was evident that the “progressive forces on a national scale,” and “locally in every trade and in every industry,” required an organization “to unite and fight” for the kinds of trade union policies that would advance labor’s interests. “[T]he one prerequisite for the creation of a progressive and militant kernel in the unions that can give them a program and push them into action,” argued Cannon, “is a revolutionary party.”¹

Cannon not only pressed these views in public speeches, but also found it necessary to reinforce such perspectives within the ranks of his own revolutionary organization. Two weeks before his Irving Plaza intervention, he advised his trusted Minneapolis comrade, Vincent Ray Dunne, that it was necessary to use the local Trotskyist-controlled teamster newspaper, the *Northwest Organizer*, to establish unambiguously that “574 is fighting in earnest to maintain its status in the A.F. of L.” Cannon stressed to Dunne that, sadly, even the Stalinists in the steel industry seemed to be conducting their trade union policy with respect to revoked Federal Labor Union charters with more vigor than the Trotskyist teamsters. “Notice how the expelled steel union lodges are conducting their fight under Stalinist influence,” Cannon lectured. Communist Party trade unionists in the steel sector were proceeding to build “an independent steel workers union,” consistent with Third Period policy around “red,” or dual, unionism, but Cannon noted that “they are doing it under the slogan of a fight for reinstatement in unity, and far more effectively, it appears to me, than our fight is being conducted ... if the *Northwest Organizer* is to be taken as the criterion.” Observing that the Stalinists were “employing tactics which they learned from

1 The above paragraphs draw on James P. Cannon, “Where is the A.F. of L. Going?” Unpublished Speech, Irving Plaza, New York, 12 May 1935, File Folder, “Cannon Speeches & Articles” [Weissman Collection], Frank Lovell Papers, New York, New York (consulted April 1994, before being deposited with Tamiment Library), hereafter FL Papers; Cannon, “Deeper into the A.F. of L. Unions,” 1935, “Speeches and Writings,” Box 28/Reel 34, James P. Cannon Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, hereafter JPC Papers; A.J. Muste, “Heed the Call of Toledo,” and Editorial, “Local 574 Under Fire Again,” *New Militant*, 4 May 1935; “Muste Rallies NY Support for Auto Strike,” “Dillon Spikes Flint Strike Vote; Slurs Toledo Workers,” *New Militant*, 11 May 1935; “Lessons of the Great Toledo Battle,” “Dillon Men Slug Toledo Workers in Flint Meet,” “Dillon and Co. Wreck Chance to Win Strike,” “Big Crowd at Cannon Meet,” *New Militant*, 18 May 1935; Art Preiss, “Inside Story of the Toledo Strike,” *New Militant*, 25 May 1935.

our past criticism," Cannon concluded brusquely, "I do not appreciate the irony of this situation in the least."

Dunne and other Minneapolis IBT leaders seemed willing to relinquish the fight for trade union unity in order to get out of the AFL and join forces with independent, local unions operating outside of the reach of Tobin and other bureaucrats. While Local 574 faced an uphill, even impossible, battle against a determined and powerful IBT officialdom, it was necessary in Cannon's view to fight to remain inside the AFL. Even if Tobin were able to formally push Local 574 out of the IBT and the larger Federation, this would have little effect if Dunne and others cultivated "close friendly relations with the Minneapolis unions." This was the necessary work that could save Local 574 from becoming "a mere propaganda group of victimized militants."

Proper preparation for Tobin's eventual success and the formal banishment of the dissident teamsters' local from the AFL demanded, as Cannon noted, "a ruthless break with every kind of tendency to direct the fight away from A.F. of L. unions at the present time." For Cannon, "The lessons of the 1934 strikes in this regard should be recalled. ... A formal severance of organizational relations with the other Minneapolis unions will very likely be unavoidable, but you should fight to maintain this connection ... while solid, friendly, and sympathetic sentiments are built up in these unions. Then when the final severance of organizational relations comes it will not have the effect of a final rupture." Cannon considered this "a thousand times more important" than the chimera of "relations with the independent unions."

As dour as his admonitions to Dunne were, Cannon was nevertheless optimistic. He saw "the making of another great victory in this situation, but it all depends on us, if ... we can show the whole labor movement how to combat the expulsion policy of the reactionaries as we showed them how to organize and lead strikes last year." Nothing less was at stake than educating the workers by concrete example of how to "steer between the rocks of isolation and defeat," on the one hand, and "capitulation" to the labor fakirs on the other.

Cannon's prods enabled Minneapolis comrades to stave off Tobin's assault for a number of years, until the reactionary climate of World War II permitted a vindictive and increasingly vicious labor leadership, aligned with the power of the state, to crush an outpost of militancy within mainstream American trade unionism. What Cannon was stressing in 1935, was that the successes in Minneapolis were not due to local peculiarities. Instead, advances registered were a product of the tested acumen of militants steeled in the struggles of building a party. Minneapolis, for Cannon, was a "remarkable example of the role of a political grouping, crystallizing in the course of a long and stubborn struggle over the most remote international questions (Russia, China, Anglo-Russian

Committee), and bringing this struggle to fruition in the soundest, most stable and conspicuous success.” In his private correspondence with Dunne, Cannon suggested that those “experts” who looked for “short-cut-to-mass work” panaceas should “chew on” the reality that the Minneapolis accomplishments, which stood among the “trade union miracles of 1934,” were only possible because of the existence of a party with a national and international orientation. Only the grounding of this Bolshevik organization prepared Dunne and others to weather the ongoing crises that confronted Local 574, further insuring that the union’s guiding Trotskyist hand was not “swamped by local and incidental influences, disoriented, isolated, and defeated.” As Cannon concluded in an August 1935 letter to Dunne, “Without a strong party cadre, governed by a broad, world concept, they would be picking up the pieces of Local 574 by now.”²

It might seem that Cannon’s 1935 stand to push deeper into the AFL unions was a losing strategy, counter-posed to the John L. Lewis-led prod to organize the mass production unions outside of the old and ossified craft union federation. This initiative culminated in the founding of the Congress of Industrial Organizations [CIO] and an upsurge of machine tenders, assembly-line workers, mill hands, factory operatives, and resource labor that marked 1936–37 as a critical leap forward for a new, more politically-engaged, unionism in the United States.³ Yet this slighting of Cannon’s contemporary perspective would miss much.

Cannon was well aware that the mid-1930s was pregnant with possibilities. He grasped that a new and possibly “independent labor movement in the U.S.” was “highly probable in the future.” Precisely because the AFL was small and ordered by “the extraordinary conservatism of the upper crust which dom-

2 The above paragraphs draw on James P. Cannon to V.R. Dunne, 30 April 1935; Cannon to Minneapolis Branch, 6 May 1935; Cannon to Dunne, 21 August 1935; undated Cannon notes, “To Vincent,” [August 1935?], Box 3/Reel 3, JPC Papers; “Central Labor Union Backs Local 574,” *New Militant*, 18 May 1935. See also “Statement By National Committee on Trade Union Situation in Minneapolis and Fargo”, 19 March 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, Max Shachtman Papers, Tamiment Institute, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter MS Papers].

3 See, for instance, Edward Levinson, *Labor on the March* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1995); Art Preis, *Labor’s Giant Step: Twenty Years of the CIO* (New York: Pioneer, 1964), esp. 3–81; Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Premier, 1974); Sidney Fine, *Sit-down: The General Motors Strike of 1936–1937* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Ann Arbor, 1969); Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), esp. 54–97; Sol Dollinger and Genora Johnson Dollinger, *Not Automatic: Women and the Left in the Forging of the Auto Workers’ Union* (New York: Monthly Review, 2000). For developments in the South see the recent discussion in Michael Goldfield, *The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

inates it," Cannon considered that a "stormy upsurge of the most exploited masses" was inevitable. "In its cyclonic tempo," this movement "will not wait for an organic adjustment of the old unions to its imperious requirements." Yet, in 1935, Cannon's sober assessment was that the "future line of development in America was not clear," and that labor's unfolding prospects would be determined by the course of class struggle. Revolutionists, Cannon insisted, must "watch for the signs of its main trends and synchronize our activities with them." They could not "make the trend to order." Contrary to the Stalinist Third Period attempt to will a new, red unionism into being, any fresh upsurge of the working masses, Cannon insisted, "must get its main impulse" from the actual conditions and conflicts in "the big industries and the big centers." Even the Minneapolis advances of 1934 should not be overestimated, and Cannon cautioned Dunne that it would be a "fatal error to get 'dizzy with success' and try to make the world of the trade union movement over in the Minneapolis image." Cannon thus looked knowingly toward the CIO upsurge of the later 1930s, but he understood well that revolutionaries had to be connected to and embedded within momentous class struggles, which were still, in 1935, taking place on the field of the American Federation of Labor. When that context changed, so too would the tactics of the revolutionary party. Cannon understood that "the party does not grow out of mass activity by advertising itself flamboyantly **but by serving the mass movement**," as it had in Minneapolis and Toledo. It was only the existence of party cadre in the unions, however, that could, finally, preserve the gains registered in such victories. The task was thus to build the party. Just how that national party building was to take place would be guided by turns taken internationally as well as by developments within the United States.⁴

Those turns, like that advocated by Cannon with respect to American unions in 1934–35, would push deeper into mass organizations of socialist/reformist possibility, where militant workers often formed a receptive audience and a left-wing was consolidating, the better to build a party of revolutionary alternative. Cannon's trade union approach in the mid-1930s, as it had for much of his life, *anticipated* in important ways a tactical turn in the struggle to organize, develop, and build a revolutionary party in the United States. It aligned, in short, with European developments in the making under Trotsky's guidance, where the orientation to establishing not only parties but a new International, took a detour in France in 1934–35.

4 Cannon to V.R. Dunne, 21 August 1935, Box 3/Reel 3, JPC Papers; "Local 574 Under Fire Again," *New Militant*, 4 May 1935.

2 The French Turn

In late 1933 and early 1934, Trotsky's international followers grappled with the reality that the political bankruptcy of the Stalinized Comintern and the pressing threat of fascism necessitated a dramatic reorientation. Only a new International, built on revolutionary foundations by a leadership determined to return to Bolshevik policies could rally those forces willing to fight capitalism and chart the path to socialism. Trotsky confronted the challenges of the period while living in a difficult and constrained exile in France and Norway.⁵ His isolation, which limited his ability to lead the International Left Opposition, exacerbated the difficulties of his French comrades, whose forces were fractured by factionalism. Contending groups, in aggregate totaling fewer than 200 members, constituted an unstable milieu with leading figures (Alfred Rosmer, Raymond Molinier, and Pierre Naville) constantly at loggerheads. Trotsky, a seasoned revolutionary familiar with the necessity of polemical debate and difference as well as the deadening *real politique* of debilitating factionalism, was disturbed by the recurring cycle of vicious animosity that characterized the French section in the early 1930s. He commented to one prominent Left Oppositionist: "You know, I've never seen faction fights like yours. With us [Russians], there were many of them. It wasn't always sweet, oh no. But ferocious rows like yours, no. I've never seen that. It's extraordinary. How is it possible? It must be straightened out."⁶

In this period, the Trotskyist movement attracted a variety of prominent converts, many of whom soon moved on. Simone Weil, whom Trotsky regarded as a "muddlehead," lacking basic understanding of "working-class politics and Marxism," soon left the International Left Opposition. She moved fleetingly through anarchism before being drawn into the orbit of Catholicism, attaining stature as a philosophic mystic. David Rousset was another whose politics Trotsky considered a mixture of "opportunism and anarchism." The most repugnant mercurial recruit was the German émigré, Maria Reese, whose conversion to the ranks of the revolutionary movement from Stalinism would prove short-

5 Norway presented an early case of the small and weak Trotskyist forces working inside an established social democratic body, the Norwegian Labor Party. See "Norwegian Labor party and the Fourth International," *The Militant*, 6 January 1934.

6 For a useful overview of Trotsky and the French Left Opposition in the early-to-mid 1930s see Naomi Allen and George Breitman, "Prologue: Trotsky and the French Section Before July 1935," in Allen and Breitman, eds., Leon Trotsky, *The Crisis of the French Section [1935-1936]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1977), 15-26, quote at 18.

lived. She soon opted to return to her cherished “homeland,” where she offered her services to Hitler’s Reich.

An international process of regroupment was championed briefly by the so-called “Bloc of Four.” E. Bauer’s International Left Opposition (Bolshevik-Leninist), Jacob Schwab’s Socialist Workers Party of Germany, P.J. Schmidt’s Independent Socialist Party of Holland, and Hendrik Sneevliet’s Revolutionary Socialist Party of Holland tried to consolidate with Trotsky’s International Communist League [ICL]. These organizations aligned briefly, long enough to declare a common interest in the creation of a new International, but soon went their separate ways. Thereafter, Trotsky grappled with how to move the fractured French Left Opposition forward.⁷

Trotsky confided to his diary in March 1935 that, “The collapse of the two Internationals has posed a problem which none of the leaders of these Internationals is at all equipped to solve. The vicissitudes of my personal fate have confronted me with this problem[:] ... There is now no one except me to carry out the mission of arming a new generation with the revolutionary method over the heads of the leaders of the Second and Third International.” He was disappointed by the ICL’s French section, which Trotsky considered rife with a kind of philistine vegetation that was “outside the labour movement.” Trotsky appreciated that, “*The high winds are now blowing against us.* The danger of fascism and war, the bureaucratically exploited economic successes of the Soviet Union, the opportunistic turn of the Comintern, the growth of the centrist-pacifist unity pressure – all that is working *temporarily* against us.” By 1936, Trotsky could write to Victor Serge that, “We must look for roads to the

7 On Trotsky in this period see Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929–1940* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 257–355; Jean van Heijenoort, *With Trotsky in Exile: From Prinkipo to Coyoacán* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), esp. 49–103; Leon Trotsky, *Trotsky’s Diary in Exile, 1935* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958); Albert Glotzer, *Trotsky: Memoir & Critique* (New York: Prometheus, 1989), esp. 176–207; “Reaction Hounds Trotsky,” *The Militant*, 21 April 1934. Comments on specific French comrades appear in Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast*, 276–277; Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 184–185. There is a more balanced assessment of Weil in Paul Le Blanc, *Trotsky* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 101–103. On the Bloc of Four see Pierre Frank, *The Fourth International: The Long March of the Trotskyists* (London: Ink Links, 1972), 48–51; Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 258–264; George Breitman and Bev Scott, eds., *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1933–1934* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972), 37–44, 49–52; Leon Trotsky, “Tasks of the ICL,” 21 July 1934, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1934–1935]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1974), 375; Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 179–180, 207; Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast*, 264; “The Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 1963, Oral History Research Office, No. 488, Columbia University, New York, New York, 231; “The Conference of Four of December 30, 1933,” Roll 6, Reel 3349, MS Papers.

workers, and in the process must avoid ex-revolutionaries and even push them discourteously aside.”⁸

These difficulties were to some extent offset by a dramatic upturn in the combativity of the French working class. The shooting of Serge Alexandre Stavinsky, a multi-millionaire confidence man influential within the upper reaches of the state and the mainstream Radical Party, led to scandalous revelations in January–February 1934 of corruption involving the Third Republic’s Ministers, Deputies, Police Chiefs, and press.⁹ This resulted in mass indignation, which fascist elements attempted to use as a pretext for launching a disorganized, right-wing coup. This aggressive move was thwarted, in part, by the impromptu reaction of the French working class, which united socialist and communist militants, despite the opposition of their respective party leaders. A more or less spontaneous general strike was waged to defend the Republic.¹⁰

Yet, as evidenced in Trotsky’s diary, the exiled Bolshevik regarded a series of mid-1930s developments in France and elsewhere as compromises constituting part of the “Preparations for a new ‘final’ war.” In March 1935, Trotsky confided to his private journal that, “this order has hopelessly undermined itself. It will collapse with a stench.”¹¹ From June of 1935, French Trotskyists did what they could to resist the nascent and then overt popular front initiatives consolidating “a contract between the working class and the middle class” that would bring together the Section Française de l’Internationale Ouvrière [SFIO], the French Communist Party [PCF], and the pro-capitalist reformists of the Radical Party.¹² Such a cross-class alliance would inevitably do its best to dissipate the class struggle. The increasingly restless French working class nonetheless mounted a sustained revolt. With the Comintern’s formal proclamation of the Popular Front at the Seventh World Congress in July – August 1935, intensified class struggle was channeled into the election of a Popular Front government in May 1936. Headed by Leon Blum of the SFIO, with the participation of

8 Trotsky, *Diary in Exile*, 47; Leon Trotsky, “A Crisis in the Workers Party,” in Naomi Allen and George Breitman, eds., *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1935–1936]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1977), 260; Deutscher, *Prophet Outcast*, 269.

9 Paul Jankowski, *Stavinsky: A Confidence Man in the Republic of Virtue* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

10 For a critique of the Socialist and Communist leaderships see “French Internationalists Appeal to the Masses,” *The Militant*, 10 March 1934; Alfred Rosmer, “French Labor Parties Ignore Storm Signals,” *The Militant*, 23 June 1934; “The Burning Question in France: Towards Opportunism or Towards Marxism – There is No Other Road,” *The Militant*, 30 June 1934.

11 Trotsky, *Diary in Exile*, 39.

12 Jean Lacouture, *Leon Blum* (London: Holmes and Meier, 1982), 273–274.

the Radical Party and the support of the PCF, the government now claimed to stand for the workers. The trade unions unleashed a massive June strike wave, a "social explosion" that Trotsky exuberantly declared the beginning of the French Revolution. It was not to be. France's Popular Front "experiment" in class collaboration came to an inglorious end with the fall of the Blum government and working-class retreat.¹³

The context of 1933–36 confronted revolutionaries with a historically unique set of challenges, in which opportunities and dangers abounded. Building a revolutionary current in the workers' movement was nothing less than the imperative of the particular hour. Trotsky's shift from seeking to build an "opposition" within the Communist International to instead creating the nucleus of a new International distinct from the degenerated and irredeemable Stalinist Comintern, situated the Left Opposition's political orientation in the mid-1930s. The upsurge in French working-class militancy, which commenced as the Third Period was waning in 1934 and the Popular Front was struggling to be born in 1935, coincided with critically important international developments. The growing dangers of war and fascism, which had propelled the February 1934 workers' mobilizations in France, made the Comintern's reversal of its sectarian isolations of the Third Period inevitable. In March Trotsky called for militants to take the next step forward, escalating united working-class action, pressing for the creation of a new party and a new International, urging revolutionaries and beleaguered proletarians to consider the creation of workers' militias and other forms of self-organization.¹⁴

Trotsky struck out in a radical new direction, one that many of his co-thinkers in the ICL questioned and opposed. Cognizant of the impotence of the small and harried French Left Opposition, and the prospects of many thousands of SFIO activists moving to the left as the Stalinists turned to the right, embracing Blum and Company with proposals to enter into a pact of non-criticism,¹⁵ Trotsky saw an important opportunity. Well aware that there was little prospect of a real, fighting United Front involving the Comintern

13 Jacques Danos and Marcel Gibelin, *June '36: Class Struggle and the Popular Front in France, 1936* (London: Bookmarks, 1986). Trotsky's assessment, "The French Revolution Has Begun," written in June 1936, appears in Trotsky, *Whither France?* (New York: Pioneer, 1936), 149–155. See also Daniel Guérin, *Front Populaire: révolution manquée* (Paris: René Julliard, 1963), 65–104.

14 "France is Now the Key to the Situation," *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1933–1934*, 238–244. See also "Bolshevik-Leninists in the French S.P.," *The Militant*, 6 October 1934.

15 See Pierre Naville, "The Significance of the United Front Between the C.P. and the S.P. in France," and "A Non-Aggression Pact," *The Militant*, 28 July 1934, both articles translated and reprinted from *La Vérité*, 6 July 1934.

and the SFIO, Trotsky nonetheless understood that a rapprochement between the social democratic and Stalinist political machines could sideline the Left Opposition and potentially exclude the Trotskyists from what would appear as an “organic unity” of proletarian forces. Trotsky reasoned that the Bolshevik-Leninists of the International Communist League could not afford to withdraw from the process of a potential regroupment of the French workers’ movement, despite the obvious limitations of a Stalinist-SFIO “united front” marriage of convenience:

[I]n France there is no revolutionary party. The ease with which the Communist Party – without the least internal discussion – went over from the theory and practice of ‘social Fascism’ to a bloc with the Radical Socialists and the repudiation of revolutionary tasks for the sake of immediate demands, demonstrates that the apparatus of the party is completely shot through with cynicism, and its membership disoriented and unaccustomed to thinking. *It is a diseased party.*

We have criticized the position of the SFIO openly enough not to need a repetition of what we have already said more than once. But it is nevertheless unquestionable that the revolutionary Left wing of the SFIO little by little is becoming the laboratory in which the slogans and methods of proletarian struggle are forming. If this wing fortifies itself and becomes hardened, it can become the decisive factor in arousing the communist workers. It is along this road alone that salvation is possible. ... the situation will be irrevocably lost if the revolutionary wing of the Socialist Party falls into the meshes of the apparatus of the Communist International which smashes backbones and characters, destroys the power of thinking, and teaches blind obedience; this system is frankly disastrous as a means of making revolutionists.¹⁶

On this basis, Trotsky proposed, in June 1934, that French Trotskyists “must take an organic place in the ranks of the united front.” This would bring them into contact with “tens of thousands of workers.” Doing so required “a new orientation toward the Socialist Party. It is necessary to penetrate it, to give it ten times the forces that has been done till now.”¹⁷

16 Leon Trotsky, “Once Again, Wither France,” (26 November 1935), in Trotsky, *Whither France?* (New York: Pioneer, 1936), 107–108.

17 Leon Trotsky, “The League Faced with a Turn,” and “The League Faced with a Decisive Turn,” in George Breitman and Bev Scott, *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1934–1935* (New York: Pathfinder, 1974), 42, 37; Trotsky, “Our Response to the French CP’s New Turn,” 16 June

This meant entering into the SFIO, as the ICL was “too weak to claim an *independent* place,” and the PCF would never countenance a Trotskyist entry. “Concentrate our main forces inside the Socialist Party, and establish therein a firm nucleus and a fraction of sympathizers,” Trotsky wrote to one Parisian comrade in the district of Saint-Denis, adding, “*In the event of a new favorable opportunity this fraction can address itself to the League with an open appeal: to enter the Socialist Party of a common struggle on behalf of a revolutionary Marxist policy.*” Doing this, Trotsky insisted, did not mean “sheathing the banner of Marxism.”¹⁸

Negotiations with the SFIO proceeded on the basis of the League retaining its own press, *La Vérité*, which had a significant readership of 3,000. While submitting to the discipline of a common organization, the Trotskyists would have all the rights of a recognized political faction, “controlling our ideas and our slogans daily in the actions of the masses.”¹⁹ Hotly contested within the ICL in September 1934, after two months of discussion Trotskyists joined the SFIO as the Bolshevik-Leninist Group [GBL]. The next month an Enlarged Plenum of the ICL continued to discuss the tactic, a resolution endorsing the new policy passing by a small majority “on the condition that the turn be limited to France.”²⁰ Naville and his followers initially rejected entry into the SFIO, and led one of a number of splits in the European section, before rejoining. But this current remained a distinct tendency within the SFIO, refusing to integrate into the GBL that Naville regarded as the franchise of Molinierist enthusiasts for entryism.²¹

Such divisions no doubt compromised the effectiveness of the Trotskyist entry into the SFIO but despite this the politics and influence of the former

1934, in George Breitman, ed., *Writings of Leon Trotsky, Supplement II, 1934–1940* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 486; Leon Trotsky (Linier), “Document on the Question of the French League,” Typescript, Paris, 29 June 1934, Roll 5/Reel 3348, MS Papers.

18 Trotsky, “Concentrate Inside the Socialist Party,” June 1934, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1934–1940*, 487; Trotsky, “The League Faced with a Decisive Turn,” 42–43. Note, as well, Trotsky’s positions on the ICL’s Youth Section, and its difficulties in pushing for a new Youth International, outlined in Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 176–207. For an account of the Young Leninists of France entering into the Young Socialists, doing so “without hiding their banner, without surrendering any of their principles,” see “Young Leninists of France Take Decisive Step,” *The Militant*, 22 September 1934.

19 Trotsky, “The League Faced with a Turn,” 37.

20 Rodolphe Prager, ed., *Les Congrès de la Quatrième Internationale, Volume 1: Naissance de la IVe Internationale, 1930–1940* (Paris: Editions La Brèche, 1978), 87, quoted in Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 264.

21 There is extensive discussion of the respective machinations of Naville and Molinier in Trotsky, *The Crisis of the French Section [1935–1936]*.

Left Opposition advanced. As the American Socialist Party's *New Leader* reported in early 1935:

Their influence in the s.p. has grown rapidly, until almost every militant, in the Seine district at least, is a propagandist for their ideas. Their platform is advanced in every internal discussion in the party. Their press, *La Verité*, and their pamphlets have a wide circulation, not only inside the party but outside as well (at public meetings, on the streets, at demonstrations. At a demonstration on Nov 10, 10,800 copies of a special number of *La Verité* were sold in a few hours). In the principal sections of the Seine District of the s.p. Trotskyists occupy responsible posts and are at the head of practical work. They are the prime movers in propaganda and membership campaigns. They have taken a leading part in the creation and development of physical defense corps and military committees, the embryos of workers militias. ... An indication of the influence of the Trotskyists is the attendance at their forums. The last meeting of the friends of *La Verité* was attended by over 400 militants Naturally these Trotskyist activities have raised a furor in the old guard of the s.p. Paul Faure, the National Secretary, ... condemned [a] resolution of the Seine District, warning the Party against Trotskyist "Insurrectionism." ... The Stalinists are in a regular frenzy. No longer able to crush the Trotskyists by bureaucratic terror, they now devote scare heads and long articles to 'The Trotskyists Who Mean Nothing'.

After a year, the Left Opposition had tripled in size to 600, winning over sections of the SFIO youth and other militants, particularly in the Seine Alliance where a Trotskyist-influenced paper, *Révolution*, had a mass circulation of tens of thousands. The GBL succeeded in organizing an SFIO defense guard, called the *Toujours Prêts Pour Servir*, which protected workers' meetings, demonstrations, and literature sales from fascist attack and reactionary provocation. If never able to sway SFIO votes on party resolutions, the GBL had sufficient strength to introduce motions independently, and could, in particular situations, secure significant support. All of this resulted in the Bolshevik-Leninists developing greater, if still modest, contact with the French trade unions.²²

22 Trotsky concluded that, in spite of difficulties, the entry into the SFIO was a success. See Trotsky, "A New Turn is Necessary," in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1934-1935]*, 315. *New Militant*, 13 April 1935 reprinted the *New Leader* article under the title, "Left Wing Group Scores Gains in French Socialist Ranks." For positive assessments see "Bolshevik-Leninists in the French s.p.," *The Militant*, 6 October 1934; Naomi Allen and George Breitman, "Prologue:

This all took place as the SFIO leadership was aligning with Third Period-weary elements in the PCF and then, later, vigorously championing the Stalinists' Popular Front initiative. The appetite for a cross-class alliance among the Radical Party, the Communist Party, and the SFIO was evident at the Socialists' June 1935 Mulhouse Congress. This gathering had been preceded, in May, by the signing of a Franco-Soviet non-aggression pact. Stalin endorsed rearmament of French imperialism and a significant layer of social-patriotic forces, fearful of Hitler's warmongering, warmed to the idea of an alliance with the Soviet Union. As the rhetoric of the SFIO moved decidedly away from class struggle toward class collaboration and unity with the progressive, anti-fascist elements of the bourgeoisie, the leadership moved to discipline dissident voices, beginning with the expulsion of thirteen revolutionary youth leaders. It was clear to Trotsky that there was little to be gained from remaining in an organization that renounced any perspective of class struggle. He advised his supporters to aggressively repudiate the politics of the Popular Front and openly champion the creation of a revolutionary Fourth International. This precipitated the inevitable expulsion of the GBL from the SFIO on 1 October 1935.

Even this final exit proved contentious and complicated for the League. With Naville and Molinier yet again following divergent paths, the former embracing Trotsky's desire for a neat and decisive split from the SFIO, the latter temporizing and adapting to a centrist current within the mainstream body. The legacy of this debilitating division, which contributed to the GBL surfacing from the SFIO fractured and politically weakened at precisely the moment it should have been consolidating, no doubt hampered efforts to integrate working-class militants won from the SFIO to the revolutionary politics of Trotskyism. This had important ramifications during the June days of working-class insurgence in 1936, when the leaderships of the SFIO-PCF Popular Front alliance exposed themselves as open opponents of a wave of spontaneous strikes and factory occupations. Had the GBL emerged from the SFIO united it would have made the French Trotskyists a much more credible pole of attraction for workers seeking a revolutionary political alternative to the capitulation of the SFIO-PCF. But this was not to be. For Trotsky, the continual wrangling within the French section was an ongoing disappointment: "The situation was difficult, but not unfavorable. If, after the Mulhouse congress, the French section had unleashed the vigorous revolutionary internationalist offensive that all circumstances dictated, it would now have a very much larger membership, and an infinitely

Trotsky and the French Section Before July 1935," in Trotsky, *The Crisis of the French Section [1935-1936]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1977), 23-24.

greater authority and capacity for struggle. Here we have in our own history an important example of an opening that was missed.”²³

As Trotsky prepared for the GBL exit from the SFIO in the spring of 1935, he penned an “Open Letter for the Fourth International,” directed to “All Revolutionary Working-Class Organizations and Groups.” He catalogued the turbulent developments of the time that cried out for unification of revolutionary workers under the banner of a Bolshevik-Leninist leadership as a prerequisite for a “victorious assault upon the strongholds of world capital.” Pillorying the Communist International’s embrace of the spent force of social democracy, Trotsky insisted that only a new International, erected on a foundation of revolutionary Marxism, was capable of offering a leadership that could free the masses from “illusions,” instead of “duping the workers, and preparing new catastrophes,” clutching at the “tailcoats of the Republican bourgeoisie.” Acknowledging that “any attempt to prescribe an identical course for all countries would be fatal,” Trotsky nonetheless looked to the United States for inspiration, seeing in the response of labor to the “deep-going crisis of American capitalism” an “awakening” of “wide layers of workers from their semiprovincial slumbers.” Struggles like those of the Minneapolis teamsters convinced Trotsky that there were imminent possibilities of important working-class breakthroughs as revolutionary Marxists gained influence and authority among laboring people. For James P. Cannon and other Left Oppositionists in the United States, the immediate aftermath of the 1934 mass strikes of Minneapolis truckers would see the application of the French turn as laying the basis for the emergence of his American followers as the leading section of Trotsky’s new global vanguard.²⁴

3 Cannon, Trotsky, and the Preparatory Ground of Entryism: Transcending the ‘Organic Unity’ Imbroglia

Cannon followed these French developments closely. He yearned for American Trotskyism to break out of its isolation, expand the ranks of active revolutionaries, and intersect with wider currents of the labor movement. “Trotskyism

23 Leon Trotsky, “Introduction to the Mass Paper, 7 June 1936,” in Trotsky, *Crisis of the French Section*, 142. See also Trotsky, “A New Turn is Necessary,” 10 June 1935 and “Once More on Our New Turn,” 15 December 1934, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1934–1935]*, 315–318, 393–398; Frank, *The Fourth International*, 51–52; “Oust Thirteen French Bolsheviks from the s.p. for Stand on War,” *New Militant*, 26 October 1935.

24 Leon Trotsky, “Open Letter for the Fourth International,” in Naomi Allen and George Breitman, eds., *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1935–1936]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1977), 19–28.

on a world scale was on the march,” he would later write. In mid-1934, Cannon could look back with pride on the brief history of American Trotskyism, the establishment of the Communist League of America [CLA], the difficult transition from dog days to daylight, the translation and publication of Trotsky’s essential works, and the trade union breakthroughs in Minneapolis. Cannon concluded that, “We in the United States were in step.” Convinced that the American Section of the ICL was “at the head of the procession of our international organization,” Cannon was committed in 1934–35 to “taking advantage of every opportunity and confidently advancing on all fronts.”²⁵

The French turn was something Cannon embraced instinctively, seeing it as one of Trotsky’s “boldest tactical moves.” During the heat of the Minneapolis strikes, Cannon apparently discussed Trotsky’s proposal that revolutionaries needed to “make their way into the revived left-wing section of ... Social Democracy and work there as a Bolshevik faction.”²⁶ With Cannon in Minneapolis in August 1934, the Communist League of America’s New York Resident National Committee put forward a statement on the issue, drafted by Arne Swabeck. It supported “the orientation proposed for the Communist League of France to enter as a faction into the Socialist Party of France (SFIO).” Acknowledging that, “This strategic orientation cannot be considered for France alone,” it observed that, “the issues are not posed with the same acuteness in every country nor is the tempo of the development the same.”²⁷

Upon his return from Minneapolis, Cannon would have been aware of a complicated set of competing perspectives on the French turn and the National Committee’s support for Trotsky’s position. Ultimately, Cannon, Swabeck, Martin Abern, Max Shachtman, Vincent Ray Dunne, Carl Skoglund, Albert Glotzer, and Maurice Spector endorsed the entryism tactic, while Hugo Oehler objected. Nonetheless, this seeming consensus was not firm. Behind the scenes,

25 James P. Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism: Report of a Participant* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1944), 138. Cannon commented to Harry Ring, referring to this period: “The thing that saved us, of course, was primarily the Old Man’s complete freedom from any sectarian conception or practice. And I guess in this country, it was due in large measure, to my own tendency of the same kind. Despite the fact that we were thrown out of the Party, and isolated and compelled to concentrate on the great principled issues, I had never had any natural instinct for sectarianism, for isolation. And was always very responsive to any sign of an opening into the broader movement.” Harry Ring interview with James P. Cannon, Unpublished typescript, in possession of the author, 8 March 1974, 15 [hereafter Ring interview].

26 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 167.

27 Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 28 August 1934, #223, Box 35, Folder 10, George Breitman Papers, Tamiment Institute, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter GB Papers].

Abern, Spector, and Glotzer threatened to defect. In New York, Jack Weber's [Louis Jacobs] ultra-enthusiastic response to the French turn, submitted to both the International Secretariat and the CLA's National Committee, was interpreted by Martin Abern as significantly different than the Swabeck statement. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Emanuel [Manny] Geltman took a strong stand against the entry of the French League into the SFIO, which paralleled the position of Pierre Naville in France. Geltman likened entry to a "surgeon" penetrating "a corpse." Debate turned on the question of "organic unity," an expression of the ostensible coming together in one party of the Socialist and Communist organizations in France, adherents of, respectively, the long-separated Second and Third Internationals.²⁸ This was largely a smoke-screen, concocted by Weber as a political cover for his factional activities, which seemed to have more to do with personal animosity against Cannon and Shachtman than with principled differences over "organic unity," an abstract slogan that Trotsky would later pillory in a March 1935 letter to Glotzer and Weber.²⁹

In mid-1934, then, there really was no definitive unity within either American Trotskyism or the ICL around how to approach what seemed a mechanical

28 Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 28 August 1934, #223, "Statement by Weber," 20 August 1934, appended, GB Papers; Communist League of America, *Internal Bulletin*, 16 (September 1934), reproducing a number of documents relating to the French turn, including the "Statement of the Resident Committee, Communist League of America"; Pierre Frank's "The Debate on Unity," 1 August 1934, which represented the French League's Central Committee position; and Pierre Naville's "To The Central Committee of the Communist League," 26 July 1934, opposing entry; Communist League of America, *Internal Bulletin*, 17 (October 1934), carried on the discussion of the French turn, with Trotsky (Vidal) making the case against Naville, and a number of documents emerging out of the discussion in the CLA, among them "Statement By Weber," which concludes "we must choose the progressive road of organic unity, the road of participation in the mass struggle," (15–18) and statements opposing entry by Hugo Oehler, "Resolution on French Question," (19–21) and M. Glee (Max Geltman), "Against Organic Unity – Against the Entry of Our French League into the SFIO," (21–24). The pact of the French Socialists and Communists, an agreement on a "united front" that was approved on 27 July 1934 by the Permanent Administrative Commission of the Socialist Party and the Political Bureau of the Communist Party is reproduced in "The Question of Organic Unity in France: The Pact," *New International*, 1 (August 1934), 59. The final National Committee endorsement of the French turn is recorded in *Internal Bulletin*, 17 (September 1934).

29 Leon Trotsky to Glotzer and Weber, 2 March 1935, Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 3, Archives of the Hoover Institution of War, Revolution, and Peace, Stanford University, translated and quoted in the Prometheus Research Library reprinting of Max Shachtman, *Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism? Internal Problems of the Workers Party* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, September 2000), 12.

and bureaucratic call in France for top-down “organic unity.” Viewed from the bottom up, this same impulse to “organic unity” appeared possibly to reflect pressure from embattled workers. Their revolutionary sensibilities in a time of crisis demanded an end to all past social democratic and Stalinist roadblocks to intensifying class struggle and argued for building coherent, organizational, responses to an obvious political impasse. In this context, which included the immediate threat of a fascist coup, the Central Committee of the French League saw the issue of an open-ended appeal for a common front issued by Socialist and Communist leaderships as essentially a matter of bureaucratic opportunism. French Trotskyists opposed “organic unity” during their entry into the SFIO in order to “facilitate the evolution of the Centrist currents towards us and in order to draw them into action at the opportune moment.”³⁰

Weber took an upbeat view of the possibility of realizing proletarian unity, thereby accelerating a French working-class insurgency, which he speculated was transcending the pre-existing differences between the partisans in France of the Second and Third Internationals. This, Weber suggested, was the making, in embryo, of a “new working party, in which ... all points of view will have to be permitted expression.”³¹

The Weber document roughly coincided with Raymond Molinier’s position on “organic unity,” as expressed in an article published in the August 1934 *New International* under the nom-de-plume “Linier” (which created some confusion, because Trotsky, too, occasionally used the same pen-name at the time). Molinier proposed that the Trotskyists take up the Socialist and Communist calls for “organic unity.” He argued unequivocally that, “Our task consists in giving the aspiration towards organic unity a genuinely propulsive content.” In a nuanced way, however, Molinier’s position differed from that of Weber. He laid more stress on the need of Bolshevik-Leninist intervention in the mass struggles of the period to counter the ossified and defeatist policies of the social democratic and Stalinist currents. “[T]hese two parties,” Molinier insisted, “with two different phraseologies affirm their respective inexistence as parties of the proletarian victory.” Molinier argued that the “organic unity” maneuver of the Socialists and Communists could, through the influence of the Trotskyists within the SFIO and the rising tempo of class struggle, perhaps be turned into its opposite:

30 “Towards Organic Unity?” *La Vérité*, reprinted in *New International*, 1 (August 1934), 59–60.

31 “Statement of Weber,” 20 August 1934, 3, appended to Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 28 August 1934, #223, GB Papers.

Thus does the debate for organic unity become the debate for a new party, a new International which is not to be the totalization of the mistakes, but whose programmatic expression is the understanding of those mistakes. ... [I]t may be the end of the blind alley in which the French labor movement has been for all the years of the degeneration of the C.I. It is the road opened to a broad regrouping on a basis which must be precise and in the course of which our program will find living contacts with the masses. Of course, in this debate, in this battle, the conservative currents of the two parties will try to transform the organic unity into a "last intrenchment," but this will to organic unity does not come from their brains, it is the function of a profound evolution of the working-class strata in an unprecedented economic, social, and political crisis, and the regroupings will take place not according to the pattern of a bureaucrat's mutual protective association but according to the capacities and the progress of a revolutionary vanguard expressing the true interests of the proletariat.³²

Molinier's position on "organic unity" thus looked at the question both from the top down and the bottom up, structuring his response with the purpose of developing further the Fourth International and its constituent proletarian parties. If Molinier lined up too mechanically on the side of a simple assertion of "Yes" to "organic unity," embracing unequivocally a rhetorical rallying cry that Trotsky clearly warned "is not our slogan," his position wrestled with the dialectical engagement necessary if the ICL was not to squander important possibilities present in 1934. Some part of Trotsky's position clearly rubbed off on Molinier (the two were in direct communication at the time). Yet the

32 Linier [Raymond Molinier], "Organic Unity, Yes!" *New International*, 1 (August 1934), 60–61. Molinier is identified as the author of this short statement in Max Shachtman, "Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?" Workers Party, *Internal Bulletin*, 3, Sections 1 & 2 (February 1936), 22. Shachtman's important statement has been republished, and usefully introduced, in the Prometheus Research Library's reprinting of Max Shachtman, *Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?* See also Trotsky (Vidal), "The French League Faced with a Decisive Turn," and "Summary of the Discussion," *Internal Bulletin*, 17 (September 1934), 1–4, 11–15, which concludes that threats of splits within the ICL will not deter the French turn: "Dear as our comrades are to us," Trotsky wrote, "the development of the organization is unmeasurably dearer to us." Trotsky also wrote "The State of the League and its Tasks," 29 June 1934, and signed Linier, original in a Communist League of America, *Internal Bulletin*, but reprinted in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1934–1935]*, 360–367.

latter then promoted appreciations of the French turn and the possibilities of “organic unity” in ways insufficiently attentive to the essential issues of political program and how they would be undermined by the bureaucratic apparatuses of the long distinct Internationals.

Trotsky subsequently formulated his view as follows: “We are not afraid of organic unity. We state openly that the fusion *may* play a progressive role. But our own role is to point out to the masses the conditions under which this role would be genuinely progressive.” While “we do not set ourselves against the current toward organic unity,” Trotsky insisted that the ICL could only advance by introducing into discussions “the critical note, the criterion of demarcation,” approaching organic unity in ways that clearly posed “the revolutionary tasks” of the current conjuncture. It was essential to cut against reformist illusions and “the passivity of the two parties” dominant on the left, Socialists and Communists.³³

It is not clear if Cannon had any thoughts on the nuances of “organic unity” in the initial stages of the discussion. He was undoubtedly preoccupied with other matters, among them the Minneapolis strike and the drawn-out deliberations and discussions involved with the possible fusion with the American Workers Party, which will be discussed below. The prospective merger with the AWP was a major component of Cannon’s discussions with Trotsky in France, where the founder of the American Left Opposition met the international movement’s leader for the first time. If the fusion with the Musteites was in the making, predating to some extent the full international discussions around entry into Socialist parties, Cannon understood well that the Communist League of America negotiations with the AWP were not irrelevant to the more general issue of entryism. He was delighted that Trotsky “approved everything we had done” in negotiations with the AWP, with Cannon seeking Trotsky’s advice on “one or two points which we had held in abeyance.”³⁴

There is no doubt that Cannon thus embraced the French turn wholeheartedly. He saw in the entryist tactic an opportunity to connect the small forces of Trotskyism to larger mass mobilizations of the working class. This would facilitate interactions with various groupings and individuals within centrist organizations, enabling recruitment to the ideas of the Left Opposition and regroupment efforts that would, ultimately, entail splits and divi-

33 Leon Trotsky, “On the Theses ‘Unity and the Youth,’” Summer 1934 and “The Stalinists and Organic Unity,” 19 July 1934, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1934–1935]*, 89–93, 370–372.

34 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 184.

sions within the larger mass social democratic organizations penetrated by ILC affiliates. If Cannon, like Swabeck and Shachtman, did not embrace Weber's call to "hail the move for organic unity and put ourselves at its service," it was because he knew that the realization of such a perspective would only produce a larger reformist bureaucratic formation – not the revolutionary party that was necessary.

The controversy that the issue of "organic unity" triggered within the CLA was hardly surprising. Arising from complex alignments generated by leftward movement in the base of the Socialist milieu at the same time that parties affiliated with the Communist International were abandoning the sectarianism of the Third Period in favor of the class collaborationism of the Popular Front, "organic unity" unleashed a complicated and at times confusing set of positions among American Trotskyists. Reactions to calls for "organic unity" within the workers' movement also crossed over into an incipient factionalism that blurred animosity to the idea of a CLA-AWP fusion and criticism of the supposedly inept and bureaucratic mishandling of the merger by the Resident New York National Committee, in which Cannon, Shachtman, and Swabeck played central roles. This overlapped with longstanding discontent, in certain quarters, with Cannon's leadership, which revived with and was given added authority by the success of the Minneapolis teamsters.

Spector led the charge, penning a vitriolic missive to Shachtman. He attacked "the rump resident committee" and "its usurpation of powers," which, he claimed, could well "liquidate the League." Writing from Toronto, where he was ensconced as a barrister-at-law, Spector struck out at "the political Troika" of Cannon-Swabeck-Shachtman, which treated "America outside of NY as 'the province': ... No information or belated information, Minutes 3 to 6 months in arrears, no accounting of conversations with the AWP leaders, no balance rendered of the Minneapolis struggle except Arne's assurance that it was 'magnificently conducted'. It is an outrage." Spector complained bitterly to Swabeck, going on a tear against "a certain member of the N.C." (almost certainly Cannon), who had reputedly issued "threatening utterances against the presumption of the out of towners, who leading a side-line existence yet venture to criticize their betters on whose shoulders rests the alp-like burden of resident leadership." Spector also objected to how discussions around the French turn, and "organic unity," were proceeding, although he considered entry "an audacious, highly dangerous, but in the circumstances of the shifting scene, ... justifiable move." Nonetheless, Spector insisted, some comrades in France and Toronto were of the opinion that the new orientation was "fraught with liquidationism," threatening the "dissolution of the International Communist League." Advocating the need for international collaboration and collective leadership,

Spector demanded an international conference of discussion and deliberation, concluding that, "More than ever, I suggest that LD is not eternal."³⁵

Positions taken in this context reflected a complicated mixture of political uncertainties, new alignments within the Trotskyist leadership, the hangovers of past personal hostilities toward Cannon, and a hardening sectarian ultra-leftism on the part of Hugo Oehler. Cannon and Swabeck, on the one hand, and Shachtman on the other, traveled a considerable distance in overcoming their dog days divide. Working together in Minneapolis solidified a Cannon/Shachtman relationship that seemed to further consolidate around agreement with Trotsky on the general principles and parameters of entryism, which they translated into their orientation to the Musteites, with which Swabeck was also in agreement. Oehler, who exhibited signs of differentiation from Cannon, Shachtman, and Swabeck from early in 1934 and the New York hotel workers' strike, worked productively in the Minneapolis struggle. But Oehler's increasing sectarianism and ultra-leftism were on display in his opposition to what he regarded as the liquidationist path of entryism. He struck out against "organic unity," perhaps forcing Cannon, Shachtman, and Swabeck to back away from a concept Trotsky himself had neither decisively endorsed nor repudiated. Those who continued to nurture grievance against Cannon – Spector, Glotzer, and Abern – may have had qualms about entrism/liquidation but they were not prepared to resist Trotsky, and found in Weber's willingness to intervene in the international discussion around "organic unity" something of a convenient cudgel to wield against Cannon. Spector and Glotzer, in particular, were content to ride the intuitive wave of Trotskyist skepticism associated with "organic unity," and appearing in the pages of Parisian journals like *La Vérité*, to their anti-Cannon conclusion. In citing Weber's perspective on "organic unity" positively, these Cannon critics were taking up a theoretical stand that appeared to plant their political feet in contradictory ways, but they did so over a tactical question that was conveniently abstract. It had the attraction of continuing an

35 For the discontents, often posed exceedingly sharply, see Morris Lewit to Albert Glotzer, 12 May 1934; Maurice Spector to Arne Swabeck, 14 September 1934 (misdated 1932); Maurice Spector to Arne Swabeck, 7 October 1934; Maurice Spector to Max Shachtman, 13 October 1934; Martin Abern to Arne Swabeck, 16 October 1934; Albert Glotzer to Max Shachtman, 22 October 1934; Jack [Weber] to Albert Glotzer, 26 October 1934, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers. Weber's position in "Statement of Weber," 20 August 1934, 5, Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 28 August 1934, #223, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers. Spector's complaint about the failure of the Resident NC to address the Minneapolis strikes adequately would find little support among NC members like Cannon, Swabeck, Shachtman, Oehler, Dunne, and Skoglund, all of whom were either directly involved in the struggle or addressing it in speeches and writings.

anti-Cannon stand on grounds where these figures felt secure in their superiority – that of international and theoretical discussion – at the same time that they were not placed in direct opposition to Trotsky himself, whose focus was on the more pragmatic and prosaic issue of entry. Entry, of course, raised the specter of liquidation, but in Trotsky's understanding of this new turn, it necessarily addressed the Stalinist-social democratic call for "organic unity" dialectically, which opened out into possibilities of seeing this proposed unity from a number of vantage points.

Spector, Abern and Glotzer, then, lined up with Weber's statement, seeing his position as closer to the French Ligue's stand on "organic unity." Glotzer wrote to the Resident National Committee from Chicago on 2 September 1934 that he supported Swabeck's concrete proposal endorsing the French turn, but it was unclear where the CLA stood on "organic unity." Privately, Glotzer tore a strip off of Shachtman for boasting that he had ended the discussion on "organic unity" with a polemical speech in the New York branch, thereby abandoning old friends on the National Committee such as himself, Abern, and Spector, dismissing Jack Weber, and siding with Swabeck and Cannon:

On the question of "organic unity." I am interested in the fact that you "demolished" this point of view in the New York Branch! Poor, Spector, you might have saved him from this "centrist" and "Hitler" point of view, if only you had written him. Maybe you ought to correspond with your old friends? Naturally, I feel slighted that you didn't try to save me. You didn't expect me to take such a silly and false position? Why don't you demonstrate the error of our ways. Weber, poo bah. Abern, well you know. Spector, he has been taken in by these Rover boys. And I, just misled! But, Trotsky! HE'S WRONG. Is there anybody you missed? Present some argument. You did, in the New York branch. Why don't you write an article. Better yet, why don't you get the *Bulletin* containing this question to the membership, together with an expression of the majority of the R.C. Why not promulgate a League discussion on that question?

Glotzer saw in Shachtman's posture an accommodation to the New York Resident Committee "apparatus," which he claimed disgusted the membership of the League and its leading comrades. The rallying cry of "organic unity" in France thus highlighted divisions among leading CLAers in the United States, although these related as much to the residue of personalized factionalism as they did to consistent political principles.³⁶

36 Albert Glotzer to National Committee, 2 September 1934, appended to Communist League

As the Resident National Committee wrestled with who should attend the ICL's October 1934 Plenum and what the American League's position on the French question, broadly conceived, should be, the CLA's leading body was deeply divided. Cannon's nomination to represent the CLA was supported by Swabeck and Shachtman, but not Abern and Oehler. Spector, Glotzer, and Abern bristled at how Swabeck ostensibly manipulated recorded votes to understate the support for the Weber statement. Cannon was eventually agreed to as the League's delegate to the ICL Plenum, apparently "at Trotsky's insistent urging." An October 1934 *Internal Bulletin* informed the membership that he would represent the CLA by: 1) endorsing the French turn; 2) recognizing the GBL as the French section of the ICL, with Naville's minority instructed to subordinate itself to this majority; 3) opposing the standpoint of "organic unity," and emphasizing instead unity on the basis of a revolutionary program.³⁷

Spector objected to a CLA scheduled conference being postponed until after Cannon's return from Europe. He was livid that the October *Bulletin* gave the mistaken impression that "our appraisal of the French problem was unanim-

of America, National Committee, Minutes, 12 September 1934, #224, Box 35, Folder 9, GB Papers; Glotzer to Shachtman, 22 October 1934, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers.

37 Martin Abern to Arne Swabeck, 16 October 1934, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers; "Record of the Vote of the NC," *Internal Bulletin*, 17 (September 1934); Allen and Breitman, "Prologue: Trotsky and the French Section Before July 1935," 21; and the statement on "organic unity" in "What Next for French Labor: Editorial Note," *The Militant*, 27 October 1934. Shachtman's statement of the CLA's National Committee position on "organic unity" differed slightly from positions offered by Trotsky, staking out similar ground that was nevertheless more one-dimensional and categorical: "to oppose the standpoint that 'organic unity', as such, is a 'progressive step', and that the Bolshevik-Leninists shall become the proponents of such a slogan. That in all conditions and with all developments that may take place in the ranks of the working class or in the bureaucracy of the two principal parties, the Bolshevik-Leninists shall under all circumstances point out the illusory and reactionary character of 'organic unity' as such (even under present 'French conditions') and to emphasize instead unity on a revolutionary program and in a revolutionary party." See Shachtman, "Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?" 23. This statement should be compared with Trotsky, "On the Theses 'Unity and the Youth,'" in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1934-1935]*, 89-93: "While basing ourselves on the currents toward unity, we develop the discussion; we deepen it; we group the best elements of the two camps around the 'maximum' of our not-at-all 'elementary' principles; we reinforce our tendency. And then, come what may, the revolutionary vanguard will profit whether there is a fusion or a split." The CLA's National Committee instructions to Cannon did not adhere to communist practice, in as much as delegates have to be free to assimilate and respond to discussions before arriving at conclusions and voting on resolutions and other matters. Oehler and his emerging faction strongly resisted any concession to "organic unity," as would be evident in positions taken in 1935-36. See, for instance, "Organic Unity," *Call to Action*, 2 (December 1935), 10-11; "Organic Unity in Spain," *Call to Action*, 2 (May 1936), 10.

ous and this is not the case. I submit that immediate steps be taken to apprise the membership of the views of Weber, Abern, Glotzer, and myself." Weber, in a private communication to Glotzer, was vitriolic: "Swabeck, like Cannon, shows all the earmarks of his Stalinist training. His is the Machiavellian theory of politics in which every means is justified in terms of his own ends, which he rationalizes (in the worst fashion) as those of the organization." Swabeck, unlike Cannon according to Weber, was not even "a good front as a bureaucrat because he fails to spread even a thin veneer of false honesty over his individualistic conduct." Shachtman, too, came in for a drubbing: "The 3rd member of the Unholy Trinity is worthy Max. His one advantage over Cannon is that he knows a couple of foreign languages and reads indefatigably, ... a literary bookworm living in the past – as will be shown more & more as he grows older."³⁸

Trotsky saw things somewhat differently, at least with respect to Cannon. He undoubtedly valued Cannon's credibility among the many European opponents of the French turn, who recognized the respected American Trotskyist leader's long history of party building, mass work, and association with the Communist International and its workings over the course of the 1920s. Cannon ended up arriving in Paris too late to participate directly in the ICL Plenum, but he still played a significant role. He firmly supported the resolution on the French turn and the establishment of a new, Fourth International. In words directly relevant to the situation in the United States, the ICL declared that, "The preparatory period of propaganda has given us the cadres without which we could not make one step forward, but the same period has, as a heritage, permitted the expression within the organization of extremely abstract concepts of the construction of a new party and a new international." Pointing to the experience of the Bolshevik-Leninist Group within the SFIO, and responding directly to the continuing opposition to Trotsky's orientation, the ICL resolution stressed that this tactical realignment of revolutionary forces was "the application of the principles and methods of the ICL in its new orientation under new conditions." Finally, even as the clearly conflicted ICL delegates only approved entryism as a tactic in France, the plenum instructed the International Secretariat to "regularly furnish all sections" with documentation on the work of the GBL "in order that the ICL, as a whole, may utilize the experiences thus acquired."³⁹

38 Spector to Swabeck, 7 October 1934; Weber to Glotzer, 26 October 1934, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers.

39 Ring interview, 13 February 1974, 17; 8 April 1974, 7–9; Leon Trotsky, "Oehlerism and the French Experience," 11 August 1935, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1935–1936]*, 65; Prager, ed., *Les Congrès de la Quatrième Internationale*, 87 and Will Reisner, ed., *Documents of the*

Cannon's authority was such that in the immediate aftermath of the plenum he was assigned to correspond and meet with the dissenting European groups to discuss the application of the decisions taken on the French turn. In a report to the International Secretariat, Cannon detailed his discussions with supporters of entryism, Molinier and Pierre Frank of the Central Committee of the French section of the ICL. His main accomplishment was to secure agreement that Naville be coopted to the leading body if he and his group agreed to carry out the policy decisions of the plenum. Cannon then met with Naville and Pietro Tresso Blasco, leading figures in a faction that had indeed entered the SFIO, but that remained separate from the ICL section on the grounds that the Molinier-Frank leadership was insufferable and a premature unification would likely only result in expulsions and further acrimony. Cannon argued that new opportunities for mass activity within the SFIO, expansion of the influence of the revolutionary youth wing of the French section, and consolidation of the ICL's international forces meant that there was a good foundation for a fresh start. But he failed to prevail. Naville's separation from the Molinier-Frank majority continued. Cannon urged the International Secretariat to "seize on even the limited possibilities offered ... by the Naville group in order to secure its collaboration with the majority and ease conflicts between them." He believed that the French section, riven by years of internal conflict, needed "a period of freedom from ... factionalism," in order to be able to transcend the bitter residue of past battles. Movement into the SFIO, Cannon wrote, offered the divided forces of the Left Opposition a "free rein to concentrate all energies on the concrete tasks" of the new turn, and "*a chance to recruit a substantial number of workers from the SFIO.*" That, Cannon concluded, "will be the fundamental solution to the problem." Cannon also met five or six times with other European dissidents, attempting to reconcile what, in the end, he had to acknowledge, were implacable political differences. Functioning as Trotsky's "representative," Cannon summoned up all of his diplomatic skills in struggling to reconcile the bitterly opposed Molinier-Naville camps and bring onside contingents within the nascent European Trotskyist movement that were opposed to entry.⁴⁰

Fourth International: The Formative Years, 1930-1940 (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 62-63, 65, both quoted in Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 264-265; [Max Shachtman], "1087 Votes for Bolshevik-Leninists in Paris S.P. District," *New Militant*, 29 June 1935; "Platform of the Bolshevik-Leninist Group in French S.P.," *New Militant*, 29 June 1935.

⁴⁰ See the discussion around some of these European contingents in Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 8 November 1934, #234, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers. Also, "Resolution on the French Turn, Approved by the October Session of the Enlarged Plenum of the L.C.I. (B.L.)," 14-16 October 1934, Roll 5, Reel 3348, MS Papers.

In all of this effort, Cannon drew on his past experiences, where he had, in the formative years of American communism, sometimes been able to help overcome tensions among seemingly opposed factions by appealing to their revolutionary aspirations. His concluding statement to the International Secretariat recognized that acute differences plagued the European ICL, which had lost a number of groups opposed to the French turn. Yet Cannon still held out hope that the gains of the French turn would ultimately vindicate the position of the entrust majority of the ICL:

In general, a certain lapse of time and experience with work in the SFIO are necessary before reconciliation with these groups will become possible. Already several facts confirm the political line of the majority for entry in the SFIO and refute the arguments of the dissenters. Undoubtedly the coming months will bring stronger proof. That will turn some, if not all, of the dissidents back toward us. It is necessary to keep the door open to them, especially those who have not compromised themselves by hostile acts against us or by going into the camp of centrist opponents.

Cannon was clearly one of Trotsky's strongest and ablest advocates of entryism, and the two men had opportunity to discuss prospects for the new project, spending time together in the French Alps after the ICL Plenum.⁴¹

Cannon returned to the United States committed to looking for opportunities for a wider application of the French turn. The question of "organic unity" was now somewhat moot, especially after the publication of Trotsky's article,

41 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 182–185; Ring interview, 13 February 1974, 17; James P. Cannon, "Report on the Situation in the French Section," 31 October 1934, in Fred Stanton and Michael Taber, eds., *The Communist League of America, 1932–1934: James P. Cannon, Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934* (New York: Monad, 1985), 364–366; Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 8 November 1934, #234, "Report of International Delegate," GB Papers. These Minutes contain extensive discussion around Cannon's meetings with European dissidents, and they also reaffirmed the Resident National Committee's position with respect to the question of 'organic unity', Cannon voting for the successful motion. In a public speech at Irving Plaza upon his return to the United States Cannon referred to attending the ICL Plenum and also to having "the rich experience of a visit to Comrade Trotsky." See James P. Cannon Speech Notes, "Lecture: Revolutionary Trends in Europe," New York, Sunday, 12 November 1934, [misdated, actual date 11 November 1934]; "Visit to Trotsky – 1934," Reel 34, JPC Papers. A discussion of Cannon's work in Europe in 1934, as well as a full transcript of his 31 October 1934 Report appears in Joseph Hansen, "James P. Cannon The Internationalist," *Education for Socialists* (New York: Socialist Workers Party, July 1980), in a section prepared by George Breitman, "An IS Assignment in Europe (1934)," 20–22.

“Bolshevik-Leninists and the S.F.I.O.” in the September – October issue of the *New International*. In this long statement, the ICL leader reiterated the rationale behind a principled policy of entry, outlined the diversity of possible outcomes that could help advance the struggle to establish a new, Fourth International, while sidestepping completely the recent furor in the American section over the issue of “organic unity.”⁴²

For his part, Cannon wasted no time in launching his appeal for broadening the approach to party building, speaking at Irving Plaza 11 November 1934 on “Revolutionary Trends in Europe.” Outlining the lessons of recent defeats of the working class, Cannon spelled out the desperate need for “new parties/new international,” stressing that the world’s “center of gravity” had now shifted to France. There a reactionary camp, led by large capital, was driving toward a Bonapartist state. Executive power centralized, weakening traditional bourgeois democratic practices within the state while, outside of it, armed fascist bands were forming. Subsidized in their mobilizations by powerful elements of reaction, the Parisian “brown shirts” were being held in reserve as a last resort in the impending crisis. Against this ominous threat, a Center-Radical/Socialist governing coalition seemed intent on paving the path to its own liquidation. As a combative working class struggled in the streets to reverse the crisis in February 1934, with a general strike movement boosting the morale of the left, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party talked of consummating a “united front,” but did nothing to push forward the mobilization of the workers. They thus provided the forces of reaction with a much-needed breathing space to revive. Cannon emphasized that the so-called “united front” of the Socialists and Communists amounted to a non-aggression pact in which each party reinforced the passivity of the other. In this situation, Cannon claimed, the small forces of the Bolshevik-Leninists of France had little choice but to enter the SFIO and seek to win militant workers to a program of class struggle, the organization of workers’ militias, and a perspective of a struggle for state power. Cannon’s bypassing any discussion of “organic unity” suggested he had been won over to Trotsky’s view.⁴³

In a later speech to the New York branch of the Communist League of America, Cannon spoke of the ways in which the American and French questions had now merged, a position that his opponents in the National Committee

42 Leon Trotsky (V.), “Bolshevik-Leninists and the S.F.I.O.,” *New International*, 1 (September – October 1934), 69–72. See also John West [Burnham], “The Question of Organic Unity,” *New International*, 3 (February 1936), 17–22.

43 James P. Cannon, “Speech Notes,” “Lecture: Revolutionary Trends in Europe,” New York, Sunday, 12 November 1934, Reel 34, JPC Papers.

rejected. Spector wrote, "I am opposed to superimposing the France of Doumergue on the US of Roosevelt." Glotzer charged Swabeck and Shachtman with "mechanically transplanting the European situation to America." Undeterred, Cannon insisted that the late 1934 situation demanded an end to the isolation of revolutionaries. The key issue was everywhere the same: to create new and widening fields of activity for revolutionary forces by adapting tactics that corresponded "to the actual development of the mass movement – to find in each country the special point of contact indicated by the movement itself." In response to critics who denounced this as capitulation and liquidation, Cannon responded bluntly that what was needed was "dialectics," not "dogma." The Trotskyists must seek "to take the actual process, unfolding in different forms in different countries, and adapt our organization **tactic** to it." Cannon directly confronted, for the first time, an emerging group in the CLA headed by Hugo Oehler, which he characterized as "formalistic, sterile, non-dialectic – in a word: **sectarian**." This kind of intransigence, "represented by the Oehler group in undiluted form – in its theory as well as its practice – is our greatest danger now. It would not only hamper us," Cannon concluded, "if it should prevail it would doom us in the present situation."⁴⁴

Cannon's embrace of Trotsky's tactical turn was hardly surprising. It had in some ways been anticipated by the Communist League of America's 1933 appeal to "all revolutionary workers, regardless of their present affiliation or non-affiliation," to work toward "the construction of a genuine Communist Party of America" and, to this end, declare their willingness to engage in "frank and comradely discussion with other individuals, groups, and organizations."⁴⁵ Prompted by Trotsky and the International Secretariat, Cannon corresponded with Reg Groves, a recent recruit to the International Communist League who had been expelled from the Communist Party of Great Britain. Cannon encouraged Groves to consider an entry into the Independent Labour Party [ILP]. As Cannon noted, the ILP would be "especially susceptible to the influence of a determined group which knows what it wants" and this opened up "exceptional possibilities for a fruitful penetration of this movement by the Left Oppositionists." Small in number, the British Trotskyists were nonetheless "united on

44 James P. Cannon, "Speech Notes," "Summary Speech – New York Branch," Sunday, 25 November 1934, Reel 34, JPC Papers.; Spector to Swabeck, 13 October 1934; Glotzer to Shachtman, 22 October 1934, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers. See also "Speech Notes," "Where Does Oehler's Position Lead?" and "Oehler's Theory of Pressure," Box 28, Folder 4, JPC Papers, referenced and quoted in Prometheus Research Library republication of Shachtman, *Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?* 11.

45 "For a New Party and a New International," *The Militant*, 30 September 1933.

clearly defined principles,” and Cannon thought that “the ideological confusion of the leadership of the ILP” presented possibilities for Trotskyist advances if only “we connect ourselves with the flowing movement wherever possible and do not permit an isolation from it.” Offering Groves and the British section free copies of *The Militant* to utilize as propaganda, Cannon pushed hard for an ILP entry, explaining that despite the differences in the political situations, the tactic had possible application in the United States as well:

The situation in America is somewhat different. Our League has 5 years of preparatory work behind it, and already represents an organization of considerable independent weight and influence in proportion to other groups which are moving toward the left. This creates the possibility for the Left Opposition here to become the main rallying center for the new Party. The left movement in the S.P. as yet is very weak and the Conference for Progressive Labor Action, a centrist independent organization somewhat similar to the ILP, does not represent a movement any larger than ours numerically. Therefore our tactics have to be somewhat different than the one we favor for England. Nevertheless, if we were confronted with the possibility of penetrating any of these centrist groups we would consider it necessary to take advantage of it.

This was in line with the generalized ICL orientation to revolutionary regroupment, and anticipated the 1934 French turn.⁴⁶ Cannon's public speaking in the

46 Trotsky wrote to Cannon, 22 August 1933, claiming that “the Independent Labor Party has made an enormous shift toward a revolutionary position” and that “systematic work” within the ILP was necessary to “strengthen this party, to cleanse it from the heritage of centrism, to protect it from Stalinism, and to transform it into a truly revolutionary party.” *The Militant* published Trotsky's views on the ILP, which concluded that, “Only political clarity can save the ILP for the proletarian revolution.” See Trotsky to Cannon, 22 August 1933, James P. Cannon Papers, International Files, “General Correspondence, 1931–1963,” Box 20, Folder 10/Reel 27, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin [hereafter JPC Papers]; Trotsky, “Whither the Independent Labour Party?” *The Militant*, 28 August 1933. Note James P. Cannon to Reg Groves, 19 September 1933; 27 September 1933; Cannon to Hugo Dewar, 29 September 1933, Box 3/Folders 1–7/Reel 3, JPC Papers. Groves, a pioneer British Trotskyist, was a leader of the Left Opposition-inflected Balham Group inside the Communist Party of Great Britain until the expulsion of the group in 1932. His ties to the CLA reached back to 1931 and meetings with Shachtman and Glotzer. He was not enamored of an entry into the ILP and soon split from the ICL, but thereafter joined the ILP, adapting to its politics. See Reg Groves, *The Balham Group: How British Trotskyism Began* (London: Pluto, 1974); Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 54, 80–81; Harry Wicks, *Keeping My Head: The Memoirs of a British Bolshevik* (London: Socialist Platform, 1992); Sam Born-

United States reflected this, an example being three talks he delivered in Boston and New York in May 1934. Addressing “Fascism – Does It Menace America?,” “The Fourth International and the Trade Union Question,” and “The United Front,” Cannon always returned to the central issue: “A party, a party, & once again – a party! It must be International from the start. The formula is – ‘The Fourth International’”; “Connect with the masses now – Be with the masses in struggle”; “Organize the united front of action and build the party of the Fourth International.”⁴⁷

4 Fusion with the Musteites

Cannon and the Communist League of America promoted building a party of the Fourth International in the United States of 1934 through organization fusion. The forces around A.J. Muste consolidated in a leftward mobilization that would culminate in the formation of the American Workers Party, established in December 1933. The AWP leadership played a leading role in the momentous Toledo Auto-Lite strikes, reaching from February through June 1934. Cannon and others in the CLA were convinced that Muste and his ranks were moving rapidly to the left, and could be extremely beneficial in the creation of a new party that would have the capacity to lead mass struggles.

Cannon's view in retrospect was that the French turn in the United States began with the 1934 discussions that led to fusion with the Musteites, even if this merger of two existing organizations of roughly equal size that seemingly shared congruent class struggle politics was obviously not what was underway in France. The opening to the Musteites likely predated Trotsky's initial conception of entryism. Cannon proudly claimed, “We translated [the French turn] for America as an injunction to hasten the amalgamation with the American Workers Party,” and “The projected fusion with the Musteites was the same thing in different form” as the French turn. Figures such as Albert Glotzer never agreed with this assessment, but aligned with Cannon in this project. Cannon suggested that Shachtman “grasped ... right away” the possibilities inherent in the ICL's new orientation, which his on-again, off-again ally judged “a positively grandiose idea.” But there are some indications that, initially at least, Shacht-

stein and Al Richardson, *Against the Stream: A History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain, 1928–1938* (London: Socialist Platform, 1986).

47 James P. Cannon Speech Notes for “Fascism – Does It Menace America?” Boston, 4 May 1934; “The Fourth International and the Trade Union Question,” New York, 6 May 1934; “United Front Lecture,” New York, 20 May 1934, all in JPC Papers, Reel 34.

man may have been apprehensive. In opposing entryism, for instance, Geltman quoted the CLA National Committee member's first estimate of the move: "It is a backward step (retreat)," attributing to Shachtman a certain nervousness with Trotsky's push for the French turn.⁴⁸

That some CLA members were uneasy at the prospect of fusion with the Musteites was understandable. Over the course of 1929–33, the American Left Opposition criticized the shortcomings of Muste's Conference for Progressive Labor Action [CPLA].⁴⁹ The CPLA was a heterogeneous contingent of militant workers, labor intellectuals, and unemployed activists driven resolutely to the left by the economic collapse of the Great Depression, the abstentionism of AFL craft union bureaucrats, and the sectarianism of the Communist Party's Stalinist "Third Period." Founded the same year as the Communist League of America, the CPLA bore the decided imprint of the Netherlands-born Abraham Johannes [A.J.] Muste, a seminary-trained minister of the Fourth Dutch Reformed Church whose espousal of the Social Gospel and radical pacifism during the World War I years moved him into the ranks of the Quakers.

By 1919, however, Muste's direct involvement in post-war class struggles like the Lawrence, Massachusetts textile strike, resulted in him being rejected by the Yearly Meeting of Friends, who were "afraid of thy work ... do not think thee a safe man." The Amalgamated Textile Workers Union [ATW], which emerged out of the 1919 mill workers' revolt in Massachusetts and New Jersey, appointed Muste General Secretary and editor of its official organ, the *New Textile Worker*.

48 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 167; American Workers Party, *Toward an American Revolutionary Labor Movement* (New York: Provisional Organizing Committee of the American Workers Party, 1934); "Reminiscences of Shachtman," 232–238, 241–242; Constance Ashton Myers, *The Prophet's Army: Trotskyists in America, 1928–1941* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1977), 91–92; Ring interview, 13 February 1974, 17; 5 April 1974, 14. Geltman's comment on Shachtman appears in M. Glee (Geltman), "Against Organic Unity – Against the Entry of our French Ligue into the SFIO," *Internal Bulletin*, 17 (September 1934), 21–24. It is possible that Geltman's quoting of conversation with Shachtman congeals a position on the French turn with Shachtman's qualms about fusion with Muste and the AWP. Shachtman apparently told Constance Ashton Myers in a 1972 interview that Muste was never really "with" the Trotskyists and Shachtman's views of the centrist character of the AWP were well known in the CLA. See Myers, *Prophet Armed*, 121; Shachtman, "CLA, AWP, The New Party and the SP," 12 September 1934 in Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 12 September 1934, #224, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers. Glotzer's sense that the Trotskyist fusion with the American Workers Party was not a French turn draws on a 1981 interview cited in Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 776.

49 For a sampling only of the CLA critique of the CPLA in these years see Prometheus Research Library, *Dog Days: James P. Cannon vs. Max Shachtman in the Communist League of America, 1931–1933* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 2002), 64–66, 70, 430–431, 585, 590, 604, 643.

The short-lived ATW, which only lasted until 1922, promoted industrial unionism and sought to negotiate agreements with employers like any other union, but was not admitted to the American Federation of Labor, and was considered an “outlaw” body. It did, however, enjoy some protection from Sidney Hillman, the leader of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. The ATW proved a training ground for Muste as a militant workers’ leader, easing him into contacts with labor education at New York’s Rand School and in Passaic, New Jersey, as well as widening his experience with worker cooperatives.⁵⁰

Thereafter Muste’s base would be the Brookwood Labor College in Katonah, New York, where he was Education Director for twelve years.⁵¹ Brookwood was distrusted by the conventional AFL officialdom, even though the trade union central provided material support for the college throughout most of the 1920s. With many of the instructors advocating socialism, some even flirting with an ill-defined communism, and Muste writing regularly for *Labor Age*, an independent publication edited by one of his long-time radical co-workers, Louis Budenz, Brookwood operated as a center for dissidents from the craft union hierarchy, particularly those who advocated the organization of mass-production industries.⁵²

50 For Muste’s early history see Nat Hentoff, *Peace Agitator: The Story of A.J. Muste* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), esp. 25–55; Jo Ann Ooiman Robinson, *Abraham Went Out: A Biography of A.J. Muste* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 19–31; A.J. Muste, “My Experience in the Labor and Radical Struggles of the Thirties,” in Rita James Simon, ed., *As We Saw The Thirties: Essays on Social and Political Movements of a Decade* (Urbana, Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 128–129; Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 130–131. On the ATW see Paul Goldberg, *A Tale of Three Cities: Labor Organization and Protest in Paterson, Passaic, and Lawrence, 1910–1922* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

51 For a discussion of Brookwood see Paul Le Blanc, “Brookwood Labor College,” in *Left Americana: The Radical Heart of US Politics* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2017), 59–71.

52 Morris Lewit and Sylvia Bleeker, affiliated with the William Z. Foster faction of the Communist Party at the time, found the Brookwood College experience enlightening in 1926–27. Bleeker was a student for the year, attending with the sponsorship of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, in which she was the elected secretary of the 3,000-member New York Local 43 of the Millinery Workers. Lewit accompanied his partner Bleeker, and stayed at Brookwood another year when she returned to her union work in New York, his skills as a plumber in high demand at the college. The two Communist militants found Brookwood a conducive atmosphere in which their dissenting views were able to evolve into sympathies for Trotskyism, which they later embraced by joining the Communist League of America, aligning with Shachtman for a time, but eventually gravitating to Cannon and becoming his firm supporters. Lewit had a high regard for A.J. Muste and played a positive role in the fusion of the CLA and the Muste-led American Workers Party. See Paul Le Blanc and Michael Steven Smith, “Morris Lewit: Pioneer Leader of American

In 1928 William Green, the AFL leader Muste characterized as a “stodgy, class collaborationist,” finally pulled the plug on Brookwood, withdrawing all support and urging affiliated unions to do likewise. Denied a chance to respond to a secretive report advocating Brookwood’s excommunication at the 1928 AFL Convention, Muste was unceremoniously stripped of his position on the Federation’s Workers Education Bureau. Muste and Brookwood were not only regarded with suspicion by the labor bureaucrats, many on the left also kept their distance. Muste welcomed American-born radicals, including Communists such as William Z. Foster, as guest speakers at Brookwood, but distrusted “foreign” radicalism and was inclined to home-grown Progressives, such as Robert LaFollette. The *Daily Worker* commented that Brookwood and Muste showed that, “those who stand neither with the right nor with the left get the bricks from both extremes.”⁵³ Embittered by the AFL drubbing and the Communist Party’s persistent attacks, Muste embarked on a campaign to rally all progressives on the basis of organizing the unorganized; ending discrimination in the unions; opposition to class collaboration, imperialist aggression, and militarist adventures; the five-day work week, with unemployment benefits and other kinds of social insurance; and the formation of a labor party. On this basis, Muste and Budenz formed the Conference for Progressive Labor Action, designating *Labor Age* the new body’s official journal.

There was considerable turmoil inside the CPLA, as Socialists jostled with AFL unionists; Brookwood college instructors chaffed at Muste’s absence and his attempt to use the school to advance his new political venture. The Communist Party and the AFL officialdom kept up their attacks on Muste. But the CPLA grew, and soon had 17 branches, most of them in key industrial cities. In the early 1930s the Conference was playing an active role on many fronts, from the Scottsboro case in Alabama and the Free Mooney-Billings campaign to textile mill work stoppages in the South; mine workers’ insurgencies in Illinois and West Virginia; and a steel workers’ revolt in eastern Ohio that launched an

Trotskyism (1903–1998),” in Paul Le Blanc and Thomas Barrett, eds., *Revolutionary Labor Socialist: The Life, Ideas, and Comrades of Frank Lovell* (Union City, NJ: Smyrna Press, 2000), 275–282.

53 Margaret R. Budenz, *Streets* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1979), 94–95; Hentoff, *Peace Agitator*, 56–72; Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 32–48; Myers, *The Prophet’s Army*, 72–73; Nat Hentoff, ed., *The Essays of A.J. Muste* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 92–131; Leonard H. De Caux, *Labor Radical: From the Wobblies to the CIO* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 94–96; Louis F. Budenz, *This is My Story* (New York and London: McGraw-Hill, 1947), 61–71; James Oliver Morris, *The Origins of the C.I.O.: A Study of Conflict within the Labor Movement, 1921–1938* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1954), 96–127; Muste, “My Experience in Labor and Radical Struggles,” 129–131.

underground union, the Brotherhood of the Mills. The most impressive CPLA initiative was the mobilization of the jobless, first undertaken in 1932. It resulted in the founding of the National Unemployed League [NUL] at Columbus, Ohio on 1–4 July 1933, where 800 delegates representing as many as 200,000 unemployed workers (100,000 in Ohio alone, organized in 187 branches) congregated despite Communist hecklers and right-wing assailants.⁵⁴

Muste's thinking was evolving; he was reading more Marx and less theology, and had even begun delving into the writings of Lenin and Trotsky. Gradually Muste realized, in the context of the escalating class struggles of the early Depression years, that he was "more and more a caricature of a Christian pacifist and only a half-baked revolutionary, and that I had to choose. I chose revolution, recognizing that it might involve violence. I did not, having given up my pacifism, think that I could remain a Christian."⁵⁵ Muste was now more comfortable marching with workers than lecturing in a college classroom, let alone preaching from a pulpit. One observer blurred the distinction in his description of a 1931 textile strike in Paterson, New Jersey: "A.J. Muste, as usual, was on hand, a battle-scarred veteran of a hundred strikes ... marching around the mill with the pickets like Israel about Jericho when they were arrested and politely escorted into patrol wagons." In 1932 Muste wrote to a CPLA organizer, praising a "swell riot" that had occurred at a picket line in Brooklyn, New York. Now an "inwardly convinced Marxist-Leninist," Muste was an uncomfortable fit with the role of Education Director at Brookwood.⁵⁶

Eventually forced to resign from the college in 1933, after appealing to the Board of Directors to enlist Brookwood in the service of "a realistic revolutionary vanguard organization," Muste was on track to lead the CPLA into the formation of the American Workers Party. This body came into being, according to Muste, because of "a radically new economic and political situation," composed of one part economic disaster and another part increasing government intervention. Urging "all elements who do not occupy a privileged position in the existing political set up" to join the AWP, Muste's Party was nationally oriented –

54 Hentoff, *Peace Agitator*, 73–84; Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 39–52; Hentoff, ed., *Essays of A.J. Muste*, 132–161; Sidney Lens, *Left, Right, and Center: Conflicting Forces in American Labor* (Hinsdale, IL: Henry Regnery, 1949), 258–259; Roy Rosenzweig, "Radicals and the Jobless: The Musteites and the Unemployed Leagues, 1932–1936," *Labor History*, 16 (Winter 1975), 51–77, esp. 60–61; Muste, "My Experience in Labor and Radical Struggles," 131–138.

55 Hentoff, ed., *Peace Agitator*, 75; Hentoff, ed., *Essays of A.J. Muste*, 137.

56 Robert Moats Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues, 1919–1939* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), quoted in Hentoff, *Peace Agitator*, 81; Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 45; A.J. Muste, "The True International," in Hentoff, ed., *Essays of A.J. Muste*, 208.

eschewing for a time international organization – and steered a course midway between the established Socialist and Communist parties, both of which were dismissed as incapable of leading the insurgent revolutionary masses. The Socialists were castigated for their pure and simple parliamentarianism; their refusal to pursue class struggle; and for cozying up to liberals and AFL fakirs. Communist transgressions were no less disabling: sectarianism and a resultant history of disruptive activities in the unions and social movements; a failure to develop a credible leadership within the American working class; and a tendency to look to Russian and European, rather than United States, experience.

The AWP appealed to some important intellectuals, winning the allegiance of the philosophers Sidney Hook and James Burnham; *Modern Monthly* editor, V.F. Calverton; journalist and poet James Rorty; veteran left-winger and expelled Communist Party figure, Ludwig Lore; and African American columnists from the *Philadelphia Courier*, George Schuyler and Ernest Rice McKinney. McKinney, in particular, had a long and distinguished history as a revolutionary actively engaged in black labor struggles, including the Southern Tenant Farmers Union and A. Phillip Randolph's organizing of Pullman Car Porters. Other militant labor activists drawn to the AWP besides Budenz, included: J.B.S. Hardman, formerly of the old Socialist Party's Jewish Federation and an editor of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' *The Advance*; Progressive Miners' leader and former Illinois CLAer, Gerry Allard; and experienced organizers like Anthony Ramuglia, Elmer Cope, Art Preis, Ted Selander, Sam Pollack, Arnold Johnson, Larry Cohen, Esther Cope, Margaret Rogers Budenz, Irene Allard, and Mary Truax. This personnel secured the Musteites' important and impressive achievements in building the National Unemployed League in 1933 and then leading industrial insurgency among auto-parts workers the next year.⁵⁷

57 On the formation and nature of the AWP see Hentoff, *Peace Agitator*, 88–89; Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 49–53; Hentoff, ed., *Essays of A.J. Muste*, 162–163; Sidney Hook, *Out of Step: An Unquiet Life in the 20th Century* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1988), 189–193; Christopher Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook: Marxist and Pragmatist* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 109–113; “Why the New Party,” *Labor Action*, 20 December 1933; A.J. Muste, “An American Revolutionary Party,” *Modern Monthly*, 7 (January 1934), 713–719; “Open Letter to American Intellectuals,” *Modern Monthly*, 8 (March 1934), 87–92; American Workers Party, *Toward an American Revolutionary Labor Movement*; Louis Budenz, “For An American Revolutionary Approach,” *Modern Monthly*, 9 (March 1935), 14–18; Roy Rosenzweig, “Organizing the Unemployed: The Early Years of the Great Depression, 1929–1933,” *Radical America*, 10 (July – August 1976), 49–52; Rosenzweig, “Radicals and the Jobless,” 52–77. Hook and Burnham are among the most well-known cases of American revolutionary intellectuals evolving into major conservative thinkers. See, for instance, Paul Le Blanc, “From Revolutionary Intellectual to Conservative Master Thinker: The Anti-Democratic Odyssey of James Burnham,” *Left History*, 3 (1995), 49–81, and virtually any of the writings

The AWP and Muste's left turn attracted Cannon's and the CLA's attention, but the road to fusion was littered with a considerable amount of political debris from the past. Cannon and his comrades routinely castigated the "progressive shortcomings" of Muste and the CPLA during the late 1920s and early 1930s. In a 7 March 1931 lecture at the New York Open Forum, for instance, Cannon addressed Muste, the CPLA, and Budenz's *Labor Age*, drawing hard lines of distinction between "Communists and Progressives." The speech was informed by the CLA's efforts to intervene as revolutionaries in the struggles of the Illinois miners of District 12 of the United Mine Workers of America [UMW], detailed in a previous chapter. Like Trotsky, Cannon tended to view "the progressives" in the coalfields, not as dissidents advancing the class struggle, but as active agents channeling genuine working-class resentments away from "any real collision with the capitalists and the AFL machine." Cannon took direct aim at a letter Muste wrote to the *New York Times*, deploring Bolshevik commitments among "intelligent workers" who were looking forward to the day when the social system "will go smash" and "we shall have a Communist dictatorship." Muste objected to a recent *Times* editorial suggesting dictatorships were usually organized "against the masses," commenting that, "We shall not make effective propaganda among such workers as these for democracy and peaceful processes of social reconstruction by indiscriminate and inaccurate remarks about dictatorships." Cannon seized on this as evidence of how "Progressivism" was shaping up to "be a great problem in the coming days," insisting that, "Only a Marxist policy will prevent it from diverting the workers into the channel of Reform." In *The Militant* in January 1930, Cannon complained that, "The CPLA people are playing the role of come-ons for the labor fakirs," some of them seeking to divert "Leftward moving elements" in the United States away from the entire international history of Bolshevism, promoting instead a "distinctively American approach."⁵⁸

on the "New York intellectuals," including Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Judy Kutulas, *The Long War: The Intellectual People's Front and Anti-Stalinism, 1930-1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

- 58 James P. Cannon, Lecture Notes, "Communists and Progressives," New York Open Forum, 7 March 1931, Box 26, Reel 32, JPC Papers, quoting A.J. Muste to *New York Times*, 3 March 1931; James P. Cannon, "The Struggle for the South: Green's Plea to the Bosses, the Progressives, and the Communists," *The Militant*, 30 January 1930; Cannon, "Miller's Manifesto," *The Militant*, 15 March 1931. See, as well, Leon Trotsky, "Progressives in the United Mine Workers," 15 March 1930, in George Breitman, ed., *Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement 1, 1929-1933* (New York: Pathfinder, 1979), 30-31, responding to [Max Shachtman], "The Mining Situation and the Tasks of the Left Wing," *The Militant*, 1 March 1930; Arne Swabeck,

The CLA thus criticized the CPLA's "sterile, aristocratic aloofness" from the Communist Party, which the Trotskyists, operating as an external Opposition, sought to restore to revolutionary health. By 1934, this critique had lost some of its punch, at least with respect to Cannon's orientation to the CPUSA. But Muste and his group were still regarded as a left social democratic formation which represented a centrist barrier to advancing the revolutionary political consciousness of the American working class.⁵⁹

Nonetheless, the AWP's success in organizing the unemployed and the dramatic breakthroughs among industrial workers in Ohio, as well as indications that Muste and others were engaging with Marxism seriously, signaled that a political shift was in the making. All indications were that the trajectory of the old CPLA was decidedly leftward. Muste recognized that:

it was the radicals, the Left-wingers, the people who had adopted some form of Marxian philosophy, who were *doing something* about the situation, who were banding people together for action, who were putting up a fight. Unless you were indifferent or despairing, you lined up with them. It must also be said that in many cases these doers and fighters were Communists or those set in motion by them. So far as my experience goes, in any specific situation where there was a militant non-Communist Left, it could stand up to them, in spite of the often vicious tactics used by the Communist Party. But if there was a vacuum, the Communists filled it.

Now convinced that it was truly religious, committed people who were willing to give up "ordinary comforts, security, life itself," to achieve a much-needed social transformation, the ascetic Muste was committed to building a new party, one that could actually make the American Revolution. The parallel successes in Toledo and Minneapolis revealed clearly the shared orientation of the AWP and the CLA, opening Muste and the AWP to see the Trotskyists as possibly similar to themselves at the same time as Cannon and the CLA recognized that the Musteites were not the same compromised political entity they had been criticizing since 1929.⁶⁰

"The Situation Among the Coal Miners," *The Militant*, 1 March 1930. Specific early articles criticizing the CPLA include Arne Swabeck, "The New Progressive Movement," *The Militant*, 1 August 1929; "An Apologetic Progressivism," *The Militant*, 15 September 1929.

59 See, for instance, Max Shachtman, "The Conflict in the Muste Group," *The Militant*, 15 October 1929; "Thesis of the Pre-Conference Discussion: Social Reformism and the Perspective of the Revolutionary Movement," *The Militant*, 25 July 1931.

60 Muste quoted in Hentoff, *Peace Agitator*, 74–75.

One important issue that remained to be bridged was the question of internationalism. Muste's organization proudly extolled the virtues of its "American approach." Sidney Hook declared, "Of all the radical parties in the field, the AWP distinguished itself by its realistic approach to the American scene and to the fundamental problems of the conquest of political power within that scene." Christopher Phelps correctly argues that the American Workers Party should not be dismissed as merely "patriotic,"⁶¹ but he perhaps understates the tendency of figures such as Budenz and J.B.S. Hardman (Salutsky) to view "Europeanisms" as an impediment to organizing in the United States. Hardman later urged the labor movement to reject "canonized truth and canned reasoning," and adopt a "realistically aggressive" posture that repudiated Communist "tutelage," which he considered to have turned the American left into "political puppets manipulated from a distance of seven thousand miles." Budenz espoused the slogans of "Advance America" and "Win America," suggesting that socialism could perhaps be promoted by Constitutional amendment.⁶² Muste, introduced to mass rallies of insurgent (often immigrant) workers by Budenz as "the American Lenin," was aware that his leading AWP organizer had little interest in theory and was instinctually impatient of those who used "foreign" words to converse with the American working class.

At one point following the fusion between the AWP and the CLA, the Political Committee discussed Budenz's obvious espousal of views that had no relationship to the Declaration of Principles on which the new party was founded. Muste explained his old ally's maverick positions in terms of ill health, excruciating pain, and isolation from party councils. In fact, Budenz never really evolved politically beyond his 1920s nativist comment in *Labor Age*: "It was American liberty and American institutions that I was interested in. The Socialists have been talking about these things of late – perhaps too late. From out of their ranks have come the Communists who can only think of Russia. Every

61 Phelps, who quotes Hook, points out that the AWP, and Muste in particular, were not hostile to "labor internationalism." See, especially, Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook*, 112–113.

62 Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 88, quoting Hardman in Walter Goodman, *The Committee: The Extraordinary Career of the House Committee on Un-American Activities* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), 66; Louis Budenz, "For an American Revolutionary Approach," *Modern Monthly*, 9 (March 1935), 14–18; Budenz, *This Is My Story*, 98–100. Cannon comments on Salutsky-Hardman in *History of American Trotskyism*, 172–175. Hardman was said by Max Eastman to have great respect for the CLA, but thought them "not important." Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 18 January 1934, #203, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers. Subsequent statements by Hardman suggest that his attitude to the CLA was decidedly more hostile. See "Memo Submitted by J.B.S. Hardman," 30 August 1934, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers.

time they want to tell us how to carry on our fight, they must first find out how Lenin did it. I have nothing against Mr. Lenin. But I am a free American citizen and I have been taught for several generations to keep away from foreign entanglements and ideas.”⁶³

This, of course, was in stark contrast to Cannon’s experience in building the Communist Party in the 1920s, which had been a two-sided struggle to assimilate the lessons of “Europeanisms,” most especially the concrete implications of the 1917 Revolution, with a realistic approach to American conditions. Success demanded tactical and strategic flexibility rather than the wooden applications of Comintern directives.⁶⁴ The AWP’s willingness to embark on the creation of a new national party while holding the question of international organization in abeyance, contradicted the entire meaning and brief history of the Left Opposition and its American section, the Communist League of America. Trotsky’s United States cadre were schooled in the absolute necessity of coming to grips with broad, international programmatic issues that transcended national particularities. Cannon was sharply critical of the AWP’s approach in a piece published in *The Militant*: “The building of new parties and the new International, which are inseparably bound together in a single task, are *counterposed* as separate tasks, and the building of national parties is put in the first order. ... The international position of any party is today the primary test of its revolutionary character.”⁶⁵ This fundamental difference could be distinguished in the philosophical approaches of two leading AWP intellectuals, Hook and James Burnham. Their “Americanized” thinking melded Marxism and pragmatism, on the one hand, and, on the other, eschewed dialectics, an orientation congruent with Muste’s commonsensical, but somewhat one-dimensional, insistence that “the job of achieving the revolution in the U.S. is in a special sense the job of American workers.”⁶⁶

63 Hentoff, *Peace Agitator*, 86; Hentoff, ed., *Essays of A.J. Muste*, 122–123; A.J. Muste to All Workers Party Branches, Organizers, Etc., 27 March 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers.

64 Prometheus Research Library, *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism: Selected Writings and Speeches, 1920–1928* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 1992); Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Jacob A. Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919–1929* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

65 James B. Cannon, “Internationalism and the New Party,” *The Militant*, 10 March 1934, reprinted in Stanton and Taber, eds., *The Communist League of America, 1932–1934: James P. Cannon, Writings and Speeches*, 306–309; Swabeck to Non-Resident Members of the National Committee/International Secretariat/Leon Trotsky, 9–10 March 1934, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers.

66 Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook*, and for the significance of the rejection of dialectics, Leon Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism* (New York: Pathfinder, 1981), which contains Burnham’s Let-

For these and other reasons Cannon, Swabeck, and Shachtman were joined by Spector, Glotzer, Oehler and others in the CLA, there being a 1934 consensus that the AWP was a centrist organization containing some left centrists, even genuine revolutionaries. As a political current that combined reformist politics with an appetite for pursuing revolutionary possibilities, the centrist AWP in 1934 was, as Trotsky appreciated, characterized by “a disdainful attitude toward theory, the inadequate understanding of the international organization, and the disregard for problems of revolutionary strategy or the supplanting of them by questions of tactics.”⁶⁷ Complicating this assessment, however, was that Cannon and others understood as well that the Musteites were a differentiated group, “a political menagerie” containing everything from “proletarian revolutionists to reactionary scoundrels and fakers.” In between were “some YMCA girls, Bible students, assorted intellectuals, college professors, and some non-descripts who had just wandered in through the open door.”⁶⁸

There was little agreement within the CLA about which AWP members qualified as proletarian revolutionists. Glotzer, in conversations with Trotsky when he visited Europe in 1934 in connection with the creation of an ICL youth section, expressed the opinion that “Muste, and not alone him, but the entire leadership of the AWP was a typical centrist leadership, people who will never become communists.” In his report on the “International Situation” to the National Committee, Glotzer noted that Trotsky favored discussions with the AWP, but considered “Centrists as the most dangerous elements to work with. They will agree on principle on paper and continue as Centrists, the real difficulties arising after agreement is reached.”⁶⁹

Cannon and other League leaders nonetheless were more optimistic about *some* of the AWP leadership, enthusiastic about the gains that might come the CLA’s way if a merger between it and the Musteites could be negotiated. It was also imperative, in Cannon’s view, to “prevent the Stalinists from swallowing up” the AWP, strengthening their already considerable mid-1930s forces. But if this was to happen it was necessary for the CLA to move quickly on many

ter of Resignation from the Workers’ Party, 21 May 1940, stating bluntly, “I reject, as you know, the ‘philosophy of Marxism’, dialectical materialism” (207). See also Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, esp. 120–127.

67 Leon Trotsky, “Contribution Toward a Discussion on the Basic Theoretical Conceptions of the International Communist League,” 4 December 1933, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky* [1933–1934], 169.

68 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 171, 177.

69 Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 201–202; Glotzer, “International Report,” Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 21 March 1934, #218, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; Albert Glotzer to Max Shachtman, 26 March 1934, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers.

fronts. All of this took place before Trotsky issued his call for a French turn and without instructions from Trotsky or the International Communist League. Yet, in spite of the qualms expressed to Glotzer, and acknowledging that he was “too far away and know too little about the concrete situation” to make a confident recommendation, Trotsky quickly accepted “undertaking fusion,” which, in any case, the American League had entered into on its “own initiative.” He thought the negotiations towards a merger of the two organizations an “important experiment,” necessary to carry through to its conclusion.⁷⁰

This experiment began even before the creation of the AWP. The 23 November 1933 Minutes of the CLA's National Committee record a plan to establish communications with Gerry Allard and another CPLA member referred to as “C___” (quite possibly Larry Cohen), in order to “take up the fight for a new international” at the Musteite December conference. It was anticipated that the question of a new party would be on the agenda. After the formation of the AWP, Shachtman talked to Max Eastman, who suggested that although the newly-formed organization was not revolutionary “he thought we should join in to make it such.” Selected CLA members had been sent to join the CPLA and it was agreed to “address an open letter to the AWP the purpose of which is to involve them in a discussion on the principle foundation for a new revolutionary party in America.” Cannon, Shachtman, and Swaback were assigned to draft such a communication. Published in *The Militant*, and addressed to the Provisional Organizing Committee of the American Workers Party, this invitation to participate in the forming of a new revolutionary communist party stressed the importance of programmatic agreement. It called for clarification of the AWP's orientation, and proposed to combine discussion with preliminary collaboration in trade union activity, common struggle against anti-labor persecutions

⁷⁰ It is necessary to address the independent origins of the proposed CLA-AWP fusion because of the claims, from many quarters, that Cannon and the CLA simply followed Trotsky's orders on such matters. See M.S. Venkataramani, “Leon Trotsky's Adventure in American Radical Politics, 1935–1937,” *International Review of Social History*, 9 (April 1964), 1–46; Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York: Twayne, 1992), 91; A.J. Muste, “My Experience in the Labor and Radical Struggles of the Thirties,” 140–144. For evidence that the CLA fusion with the AWP was being discussed and developed without Trotsky's involvement see Morris Lewit to Albert Glotzer, 11 April 1934; Glotzer to Lewit, 17 June 1934 [misdated January], Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers. Trotsky's endorsement of the attempt to unite with the AWP is in “The Proposed Fusion in the United States,” 29 March 1934, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky* [1933–1934], 271. Cannon later confirmed that when, in October 1934, he had a chance to meet with Trotsky in France and discussed the Musteite merger, Trotsky was fully in favor of what had been done, expressing hope that Muste would develop into a real Bolshevik. See also Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 177, 184.

and fascist mobilization, and work among the unemployed. Well aware that elements of the AWP leadership were opposed to any idea of fusion, Cannon and the CLA appealed to the Musteite ranks publicly but proposed that designated leadership committees conduct initial rounds of negotiation. The CLA's prominence in the New York hotel workers' strike and its activity in the first stirrings of the teamsters' uprising in January – February 1934, made it difficult for Muste and the AWP to simply brush off the Trotskyist unity initiative.⁷¹

These preliminary steps taken, Hugo Oehler pushed within the National Committee for a statement of clarification that would define the parameters of the overture to the Musteites. Shachtman offered a lengthy statement, which was unanimously approved, that included the following core passages:

The present policy of the CPLA is to found in the United States a nationally limited Centrist party.

The difference between this movement and the "classic Centrist" parties is that it is in a state of flux, the direction of which is generally to the Left, a tendency particularly marked in the ranks of the CPLA, which contain a goodly number of Communist, or Communistic elements, or elements easily susceptible to Communist influence or orientation.

Our task is to exert all possible influence and power to prevent the formation of a Centrist party for the purpose of strengthening the trend towards the formation of a new **Communist** party, with an unmistakable Communist program, i.e., with **our** program.

The first step in this direction is to put an 'obstacle' in the path towards Centrism of the CPLA by compelling its leadership to engage in a discussion of precisely that question which they want to avoid: i.e., the question of the fundamental program of the movement and its international orientation and affiliation.⁷²

71 Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 23 November 1933, Box 35, Folder 9; Minutes, 18 January 1934, #203, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; Arne Swabeck, "An Open Letter to the American Workers Party," *The Militant*, 27 January 1934; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 135–136. Swabeck pushed to have the open letter strengthened, stressing that, "in our opinion the new revolutionary party is obliged to clearly define its attitude to the international movement, to social reformism, and to the present currents within the communist movement." His motion lost in a NC vote, with Cannon, Shachtman, and Oehler opposing. Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 25 January 1934, #204, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers.

72 Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 7 February 1934, #207, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers.

Negotiations between Hook, Hardman, Muste, Calverton, Budenz, and Burnham for the AWP and Cannon, Shachtman, Swabeck, and Abern for the CLA proceeded haltingly for five months from February – June 1934. The Trotskyists were able to make significant progress with the Musteites around important questions of the state and revolution, reformism and Stalinism, and the need for the creation of a new, Fourth International.

Cannon was undoubtedly the single Resident National Committee member who approached the Musteites with a genuine belief that fusion was in both organizations' best interests. He refused to vote for a May 1934 Shachtman motion proposing, "To break up the AWP formation at a time and under circumstances most favorable to us and to the development of a Left wing throughout the AWP, and most unfavorable (i.e., to deliver the hardest blow) to the Centrists of the AWP." It proved difficult to move the AWP leaders, especially Hook, away from their rejection of any language they considered un-American, and the juxtaposition of "workers' democracy versus dictatorship of the proletariat" proved a major stumbling block in the early fusion dialogue. Shachtman recalled making concessions: "we didn't insist upon the letter of the law from the Marxist and Leninist standpoint; we were amenable to using language in our program that they were more accustomed to and not the specific jargon in which we felt so much at home." *The Militant* carried a series of articles on the AWP and its politics highlighting both the common ground between the Musteites and the CLA and what remained contentious, Cannon calling particular attention to the necessity of building national parties and a new International simultaneously. Swabeck issued a March circular to all League branches hinting at a possible fusion, asking comrades in the field to offer their views. If the AWP remained committed to a "Left Socialist program, that is, a Centrist program," it was nonetheless the case that the CLA might well be able to push the new organization forward. "The League is not committed to any steps or to any conditions in the new party," Swabeck wrote, "except the general proposition of founding this new party on a Communist basis." To that end, collaboration with the Musteites was proceeding, and the first step was agreement on "the formation of a labor defense organization built on a broad basis," with an eventual proposal to have Muste serve as Chairman and Rose Karsner as secretary. Cannon was the major League figure bringing this Non-Partisan Labor Defense Committee into being, coordinating discussions with the AWP, the League, Herbert Solow's Provisional Committee for Labor Defense, the Left Poale Zion Group, and a cohort of anarchists associated with Carlo Tresca.⁷³ For all of this, the fusion voyage with the AWP was anything but smooth sailing.

73 Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook*, 114–115; Hook, *Out of Step*, 197–199; Sidney Hook, "On Workers'

Not all CLAers adapted agreeably to the possibility of fusion with the AWP and the Cannon-Swabeck-Shachtman approach to a proposed merger. Founding League member and Progressive Mine Workers militant expelled from the Illinois movement in an anti-communist purge, Joseph Angelo, early voiced his "critical attitude to the Musteite attempt to supplant 'the great revolutionary forefathers.'" In the Boston branch, seven members of the League, led by pioneer Trotskyist Antoinette Konikow resigned from the CLA in a confused factional fog. They responded to the expulsion of B.J. Field with agreement that the freelancing economist had been entirely wrong in his derailing of the hotel workers' strike and in his response to League charges, but that the necessity of liquidating him by expulsion "precludes all hope of the League serving as the nucleus for a new party." Decrying "sectarian stupidities," deploring Cannon and Shachtman showing themselves to be "the same old factional witch-burners, us[ing] the same old bureaucratic ultimatism that characterized the official Communist Party," and refusing "to strengthen the bargaining position of these League leaders in their 'negotiations' with the Muste group," Konikow and her followers proclaimed that they could "work better for the League" outside of it "rather than as members." After a trip to Boston, a conciliatory Cannon eventually orchestrated the reintegration of these malcontents, whom their local comrades complained were "unable to distinguish any important principled differences between the Left Opposition and the Muste group." Finally, although it was not yet clear, even to Cannon and others in the NC, Oehler was starting down the path of intransigent, sectarian opposition to the whole prospect of regrouping with other revolutionary elements. This process began with the 1934 fusion campaign of the CLA and the AWP, and would culminate in the 1936 entry of the American Trotskyists into the Socialist Party (SP). In March 1934 Oehler wrote to Chicago alternate NC member, John Edwards, advising him of an emerging polarization in the Resident New York Committee: "Jim, Max and Arne vs. Hugo. Marty not taking a position yet." Cannon subsequently concluded that his old friend Hugo had not liked the idea of a merger from the very beginning.⁷⁴

Democracy," *Modern Monthly*, 8 (October 1934), 529–544; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 243–244; Arne Swabeck to All Branches, 10 March 1934, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers; Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 26 February 1934, #210; 8 March 1934, #211; 23 April 1934, #215a; 19 May 1934, #216; 21 May 1934, #217, GB Papers; Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 101–106; Judy Kutulas, *The Long War*, 60–71; Max Shachtman, "The Program of the AWP," *The Militant*, 24 February 1934; James Cannon, "Internationalism and the AWP," *The Militant*, 10 March 1934.

74 Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 18 January 1934, #203; "Statement to the Communist League of America," 17 March 1934, by Boston Comrades,

The AWP leadership was also divided, especially on international questions. Hook and Burnham were favorably disposed toward Cannon and the League, and apparently visited the Second Avenue headquarters of the CLA. The sympathetic duo counselled the Trotskyists not to respond with hostility to a provocation aimed at longstanding Left Opposition understandings of Stalinism and the historic achievements of the Soviet Revolution. Shachtman, in particular, was drawn to this intellectual pair. Their preoccupations, he speculated, were much closer to Trotskyism than those of a typical Musteite: theory and programmatic precision; active struggle against both Stalinism and social democracy; and the relationship of internationalism to party building. Burnham, perhaps the single AWP intellectual most keen to fuse with the CLA, prepared a lengthy twenty-point memorandum on international questions, thirteen of which agreed with Trotskyist criticisms of the existing Second and Third Internationals. But he also declared, in keeping with the attitude of Muste, Budenz, and Hardman, that it was premature to advocate the formation of a specific new International. The CLA's call for the creation of a Fourth International and its ostensibly slavish dependence on Trotsky's directives in general were damaging to the prospects of creating a viable revolutionary movement in the United States.

In a subsequent letter that Cannon saw as inspired by Budenz and Hardman, the AWP also cautioned the CLA that it was necessary to avoid any appearance of an "attack upon the Soviet Union," suggesting that American Trotskyist criticism of the Communist International often appeared to take "an antagonistic attitude" toward Russia. This, claimed the AWPers, did not sit well with the working class. Such rebukes naturally angered Cannon and other CLA leaders, who had been defending the Soviet Union and the revolution that created it

and "Concerning the State of Resignation from the CLA of the Konikows and Their Followers, Reply by the Boston Branch," 25 March 1934, appended to Minutes, 31 March 1934, #213; Minutes, 3 April 1934, #214; Minutes, 19 May 1934, #216; 21 September 1934, #225, GB Papers; Oehler to Edwards, 5 March 1934 and Cannon to International Secretariat, 15 August 1935, quoted and reprinted in the Prometheus Research Library reprinting of Shachtman, *Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?* 9, 74. For his part, B.J. Field wrote to his supporter William Krehm, in Montreal, suggesting that the "Cannon-Shachtman" alliance in the CLA was following a trajectory that precluded them from finding their way into the new revolutionary party: "They are dickering with the Musteites to obtain entrance into the American Workers Party which is definitely a Centrist movement." Trotsky, too, was castigated, "his line internationally" being regarded by Field as "the liquidation of the sections of the L.O. ... By throwing them into Centrist formations. This is also the meaning of the negotiations with Muste here." See Field to Krehm, 4 March 1934, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers.

for years. Cannon recalled how he and others, "In white heat ... sat down and knocked out a blistering reply." Having got this anger out of their system, Cannon, Swabeck, and Shachtman decided to forgo any recrimination, and instead state clearly their orientation on the principled questions while pressing firmly for unity.

Cannon and Shachtman both later acknowledged that in their meetings with the AWP leaders they were affable and reasonable. Hook, who supported the merger, according to his later convoluted explanation, to advance either the cause of a revolutionary party in the United States or "my resolution to drop out of political activity," later told Constance Ashton Myers that, "The theoretical basis of the merger was really the program of the American Workers Party." This seems inaccurate, as the Musteites agreed to withdraw their objections to Trotsky and the Fourth International, revising their previous view that any new International should be merely "a cooperation between parties" rather than an international revolutionary general staff, with the responsibility of directing policy and practice.⁷⁵

Dissidents on the CLA's National Committee channeled their personal antagonisms to the Cannon-Swabeck-Shachtman "troika" into carping about the means by which a fusion, which they all supported, was being brought about. Glotzer, resident in Chicago, mistrusted the AWP, seeing in the Musteite party only centrists likely to betray the principles of any truly communist international. New York's Morris Lewit learned from an AWP contact that sentiment for fusion within the Musteite body throughout the country was not strong, reporting this to Glotzer. "There will be no fusion," Lewit's informant stated bluntly. In March 1934, as Shachtman was touring CLA branches across the country to address the possible forthcoming fusion, Glotzer begged him to change his approach from preparing the membership for inevitable fusion to girding for "ensuing conflicts." "The lunge for the AWP on the part of the National

75 The above paragraphs draw on Max Shachtman, "Radicalism in the Thirties: The Trotskyist View," in Simon, *As We Saw the Thirties*, 29–30; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 242–244; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 175–179; John P. Diggins, *Up From Communism: Conservative Odysseys in American Intellectual History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 161; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 90; Hook, *Out of Step*, 198–204; Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 55; James Burnham, "Memorandum on the International Position of the American Workers Party (with special reference to the position of the Communist League)," no date, Roll 10, Reel 3353, MS Papers; Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 2 June 1934, #219, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; "American Workers Party Sends Letter on Unity," *The Militant*, 22 September 1934; "Communist League Replies to Letter of AWP on Unity," *The Militant*, 29 September 1934. Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook*, 113–123 has the fullest discussion of Hook's orientation and motivation with respect to the fusion.

Committee," Glotzer argued, "must be described politically as a lack of confidence" in the CLA.

Officially, Swabeck reported that, "the arrangement for practical collaboration" between the AWP and the CLA "proceeds slowly," but he, too, advised Shachtman not to "present the idea of fusion as an almost accomplished fact." Swabeck had picked up intimations that "certain field organizers" among the Musteites were not "merely opposed to Stalinites," but also troubled by the thought of "monkeying around with Communists." He therefore saw "a whole series of difficulties ahead." Swabeck also expressed privately that he was discouraged by the back-biting emerging in New York League meetings, where Oehler was beginning to sow discord and confusion around "our new party orientation and attitude to the AWP."

Others tended to paint the picture more grimly, noting that the trade union, unemployed, anti-fascist, and May Day united front activities of the Musteites and the CLA were not exactly panning out, with the AWP tending to foot-dragging and maneuvering to avoid actually working with the American Trotskyists. Lewit wrote that "even Cannon is beginning to lean backward on the question of fusion." By July, Glotzer was writing to Shachtman to disabuse him of the illusion that anything would result from the CLA-AWP negotiations. Glotzer was convinced that there was nothing to be gained from a merger with the Musteites, "either in repute or in numbers," and questioned why Shachtman still agreed with Cannon that, "We have got to unite with the AWP!"

Weber, privy to the Glotzer-Shachtman letter, responded with sarcasm: "it is necessary to understand how the NC came to a position that contains the most obvious and childish contradiction under the foolish notion that they were being highly dialectical – ... We must know how to tie up the questions of the AWP and the French question ... And Max makes a speech at the NC that if the NC is not supported by the League, then he will go with the NC into the AWP anyway, – that's how important it is."⁷⁶

Spector began grouching that while he favored fusion, he was not about to "be 'fused' in any manner that the Pooh-bahs of the R.C." felt like, and fretted that a "new party" would be "a rank swamp of centrism, unless there is a group bound by common political consciousness capable of defending its ideas." Glotzer extended this critique, and by October 1934 was coming peril-

⁷⁶ The above paragraphs draw on Albert Glotzer to Max Shachtman, 26 March 1934; Arne Swabeck to Max Shachtman, 2 April 1934; Morris Lewit to Albert Glotzer, 11 April 1934; Swabeck to Shachtman, 2 May 1934; Lewit to Glotzer, 12 May 1934; Glotzer to Lewit, 17 June 1934 [misdated January]; Glotzer to Shachtman, 4 July 1934; Jack Weber to Albert Glotzer, 26 October 1934, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers.

ously close to breaking off relations with Shachtman, haranguing his old friend and former faction leader for being complicit in a Resident NC that conducted negotiations with the AWP in a highly bureaucratic manner. It all “smacked too much of Stalinism.” More picturesque, if more vitriolic, was Weber: “You have heard, no doubt, that pigs have an innate propensity for making a dirty mess of their sties. In our particular sty the filth has mounted so high that even the pigs can stand it no longer. They want a new sty. The old one is certainly dirty and needs cleaning, – of that there can be not the least question. The very ones who have made it uninhabitable point to it with scorn and demand that it be cleaned. Or, rather, they say that it is no longer possible to clean it. Hence the need for ‘flight’, headlong, into the AWP.”⁷⁷

With comment like this flung promiscuously about in private correspondence among CLA members, it is understandable that little headway was made in the proposed merger during the summer of 1934. That anything at all was accomplished during the first eight months of the year was surprising enough. The full-time involvement of Resident NC figures – especially Cannon, Shachtman, and Oehler – in the 1934 New York hotel workers and Minneapolis teamster strikes, the Field and Weisbord imbroglios, sustaining *The Militant*, launching a monthly theoretical magazine, the *New International* in July 1934, and various other matters, reduced the time and energy available to pursue the fusion, a problem exacerbated by the fact that the move was opposed by sections of both groups.

Adding to the CLA’s difficulties was that it was in desperate financial straits. It existed from week to week only by borrowing from one organizational fund to pay the immediate expenses of another, an issue that was the constant preoccupation of office functionary, Martin Abern, who was developing into an inveterate cliquist. Over the course of the 1930s, Abern cultivated a subterranean anti-Cannon semi-faction, to which he was “passionately devoted.” This was to play an important role in subsequent developments, especially as a growing rift between Cannon and most of his co-workers in the leadership ranks of American Trotskyism emerged.⁷⁸

77 Maurice Spector to Max Shachtman, 13 October 1934; Albert Glotzer to Max Shachtman, 22 October 1934; Jack Weber to Albert Glotzer, 26 October 1934., Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers.

78 On the financial straits of the League see Martin Abern, “To the Resident members of the RC of the Communist League,” 1 April 1934, appended to Martin Abern to Max Shachtman, 1 April 1934; Arne Swabeck to Max Shachtman, 2 April 1934; Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers; Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 19 February 1934, #209; 26 February 1934, #210; 8 March 1934, #211; 31 March 1934, #213; 23 April 1934, #215a; 21 May 1934, #217; 29 May 1934, #218; 28 August 1934, #223; 12 September 1934, #224, Box 35,

The administrative limitations of the CLA in this period meant that, despite good intentions, some things just never got done. The *New International* was

Folder 10, GB Papers. Indicative of the financial crisis, and the proclivities and pressures sustaining it, is Albert Glotzer to the National Committee, 2 September 1934, addressing the failure to keep up with the obligations to the International, protesting that money raised for Trotsky to offset his precarious situation in Europe, had not been forwarded to him, appended to Minutes, #224: "we are generally in an emergency financial situation. ... We were never very exact in financial matters. But it would have been good to have begun with that [Trotsky] fund. Quite seriously, the R.C. must make good this money without delay. I am not quite sure what we can do for Verite. With the Cubans demanding assistance, Unser Wort in need of the same, the Russian Bulletin transferred to this country, the campaign for L.D., the convention and lots of other important projects, I can hardly see through [to the successful raising of the money needed]." Abern's contribution to American communism and Trotskyism was two-sided, and he made his mark as an important, indeed crucial, element in the administrative apparatus of the revolutionary movement, first in the Communist Party and then in the Trotskyist movement. But his strengths as a functionary were turned to negative purpose by his penchant for forming clique-like factional alliances around personal combinations. Cannon noted that Abern's commitment to the faction he was aligned with had always been excessive. Once aligned with Cannon in the Communist Party faction fights of the 1920s, Abern opposed Cannon within the developing Trotskyist movement of the 1930s. Cannon later noted the shift, which hardened during the dog days factionalism discussed earlier. "Abern had been up to that point 100% Cannonite and then he became 100% antiCannonite." Opposed to entry into the Socialist Party on purely tactical grounds, Abern did not, unlike Oehler, see entryism as a basis on which to split away from the orthodox Trotskyist movement. So he ended up remaining in the movement, albeit as a constant critic of Cannon, feeding off of growing resentments that separated Cannon from the Trotskyist "Club's" New York Center. Abern's cliquist practices congealed in this 1936–37 entryist period, playing a role in cultivating anti-Cannon sentiments among sectors of those Trotskyists entering the SP. The clique methods of Abern, which included secretly distributing communications from the New York office to factional allies across the country, promoting a politics in which principles were given short shrift and personal alliances were paramount, depended on his administrative role in the Trotskyist central office apparatus. Something of this can be gleaned from the brief discussion of Abern in Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 41–42. The perniciousness of this clique practice is dissected by Joe Hansen, who had been won over to Trotskyism and the politics of the Abern clique in Utah in 1934 by the Canadian Earle Birney (Earle Robertson). As a member of the Abern clique, Hansen experienced firsthand the "insider" cultivation of young comrades, always expressed in hostility towards Cannon, who was often regarded as a cold and distant leader. But Hansen, who was to work with Cannon during the entryist initiatives in California, was convinced by actual involvement with Cannon that cliquism was the antithesis of revolutionary practice. He wrote to Rose Karsner in 1937: "I was really astounded that my decision to follow out the implications of entry could result in such a vicious personal attack against me. This the first insight I have had into what constitutes the charge of Cannonism in the movement." Joe to Rose [Cannon], no date, 1937, Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers. As Cannon later noted

supposed to carry articles directly addressing the AWP fusion, with Shachtman assigned to make an assessment of "The American Workers Party: Communism or Centrism." Spector was to explore "The Marxism of Sidney Hook." Neither appeared, and Shachtman, as editor, was critical of Spector's failure to deliver. Shachtman's broad critique of centrism and the AWP narrowed in focus as a result of his animosity to Hook, whom he was clearly targeting in the first issue of the new party's theoretical magazine with the article, "Dictatorship of Party or Proletariat: Remarks on a conception of the AWP ... and Others." Shachtman concluded with a barbed defense of Leninist fundamentals: "The revolutionary dictatorship will suppress only those who take up arms against it – the Bolsheviks never did more than that in Russia. ... History is not for professors, but something to learn from, and truth being always concrete, the lessons to be drawn from the last seventeen years, at least, of revolutionary struggle lead to certain inescapable conclusions. ... We follow Lenin."

Anxious to publish Spector's article on Hook, Shachtman pleaded, "for the love of Christ and man, ship that article along to me by the fastest possible route. Every day counts and keeps me in a tyranny of sweat when I descend to the mail-box and, opening it, find it empty of a Toronto envelop." Later, alluding to "the veins of the Maple Leaf, and by all sorts of other things holy and profane," Shachtman asked not to be let down "so disgracefully again," begging one more time to be sent "that almost mythical article." It was to no avail, although Spector did come up with a short set of notes on Germany and the crisis of fascism.⁷⁹

Editorial lapses were one thing. But the CLA's leadership malfunction extended well beyond this, a consequence of demanding too much from too few, a problem further complicated by ongoing bitter relations within the National Committee. By the end of the summer Swabeck, as National Secretary, moved

of Hansen, "That's a sample of a clique operation that eventually backfired." See Ring interview, 13 February 1974, esp. 8, 15–20; Joseph Hansen, "The Abern Clique," *Education for Socialists* (New York: National Education Department, Socialist Workers Party, September 1972). On Birney/Robertson see Bruce Nesbitt, ed., *Conversations with Trotsky: Earle Birney and the Radical 1930s* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2017); and on the Hansen/Birney relationship Joe Hansen to Earle Birney, 27 June 1934, Earle Birney Papers, Fisher Rare Book Room, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada, courtesy of Tom Reid; Hansen, "The Abern Clique," 25.

79 The above two paragraphs draw on Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 21 May 1934, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; Max Shachtman to Maurice Spector, 5 June 1934; 27 June 1934, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers; Max Shachtman, "Dictatorship of Party or Proletariat: Remarks on a Conception of the AWP ... and Others," *New International*, 1 (July 1934), 9–11; Maurice Spector, "The Crisis in Fascism: The Events in Germany," *New International*, 1 (August 1934), 47–48.

a motion aimed at tightening up the procedures of the NC in order to put the merger with the Musteites on a more secure footing. "We are about to take steps toward actual fusion with the AWP," a worried Swabeck noted, "with disintegrating tendencies and looseness prevalent in the League." If "the present condition of the League" was not changed, he argued, "an alarming situation may arise." Cannon, Swabeck, and Shachtman took responsibility for the National Committee's dysfunctional state in a 30 November 1934 resolution on the CLA's Organizational Report that acknowledged "grave faults of commission and omission in the conduct of their work." They also noted that while Oehler carried out his duties, sacrificed personally, and collaborated with other functioning members of the NC, he was wrong to have "formed a faction in the League despite the fact that normal democratic processes were never denied to him." The harshest criticisms were levelled at the "clique tendencies" and "personal combinations" nurtured by Abern, Glotzer, Spector, and alternate member, John Edwards.⁸⁰

Despite these serious problems, momentum for fusion accelerated in September – October 1934. The successful conclusion of the Minneapolis teamsters' struggles made the seemingly insignificant forces of American Trotskyism seem suddenly relevant and attractive to the class struggle Musteite militants, fresh from their own battles on Toledo picket lines and spirited mobilizations of the jobless. As Cannon later wrote: "Toledo and Minneapolis had become linked as twin symbols of the two highest points of proletarian militancy and conscious leadership. These two strikes tended to bring the militants in each battle closer together; to make them more sympathetic to each other, more desirous of close collaboration." Muste viewed the matter similarly: "It was in a sense inevitable that these two streams – the A.W.P. and the Communist League of America ... should come together."⁸¹ The leaderships of both organizations were also undoubtedly aware that the mass appeal of their militant stands in Minneapolis and Toledo brought them to the attention of other dissidents, then in the process of breaking away from ostensibly revolutionary organizations. These included Benjamin Gitlow and Herbert Zam leaving the

80 Communist League of American, National Committee, Minutes, 21 September 1934, #225, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; Cannon, Shachtman, Swabeck, "Resolution on the Organizational Report of the National Committee," 30 November 1934, reprinted as Appendix 1 in the Prometheus Research Library reprint of Shachtman, *Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?* 69–71.

81 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 167–168; Muste, "My Experience in the Labor and Radical Struggles of the Thirties," 139; Hentoff, *Peace Agitator*, 89; Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 55; A.J. Muste, "What Mean These Strikes?" *Modern Monthly*, 8 (October 1934), 517–521; Hentoff, ed., *Essays of A.J. Muste*, 163.

Lovestone Opposition; Joseph Zack breaking from the Communist Party; and W.W. Norris and a group of nine militants of the Revolutionary Policy Committee [RPC] making noises about exiting the Socialist Party. Fusion of the AWP and the CLA would make it easier to recruit these forces, and others like them in the future, who otherwise might gravitate to rival left-wing currents.⁸²

The fall of 1934 witnessed a concerted effort on the part of the Communist League of America leadership and those forces supporting fusion within the American Workers Party to push the merger forward. Cannon addressed the AWP, pointing out that if the Musteites were determined to make the American revolution on their own they were engaged in a futile venture, and that aligning with the CLA would open important avenues for theoretical advance and practical collaboration. Cannon contended that a fused organization could expand its influence in America's larger cities, as well as in the industrialized

82 Robert J. Alexander, *The Right Opposition: The Lovestoneites and the International Communist Opposition of the 1930s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1981), 64–69, and for the Lovestone Opposition in general, Paul Le Blanc and Tim Davenport, eds., *The "American Exceptionalism" of Jay Lovestone and His Comrades, 1929–1940: Dissident Marxism in the United States*, Volume 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2015); James P. Cannon to All Branches, 11 October 1933, "Negotiations with the Gitlow Group," Box 49, Folder 7, "Cannon Correspondence, Houghton Library," GB Papers; "Gitlow Conference for a New Party," Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 20 June 1934, #220; 12 September 1934, #224, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 179; Sam Gordon and Morris Chertov in Les Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him* (New York: Pathfinder, 1976), 70, 100–101; Art Preis, "Both Sides Are Right! Toledo and Minneapolis Argue Over Which City Has Most 'Labor Trouble,'" *New Militant*, 2 November 1935; Max Shachtman, "New Group for a New Party," *The Militant*, 26 May 1934; "Herbert Zam Quits the Lovestone Group," *The Militant*, 8 September 1934. Later in the fall/early winter there would be some movement from the Communist Party into the CLA-AWP new party movement. See Jack Taylor, "New York Trade Unionists Quit CP, Join Movement for New Party in US," *The Militant*, 17 November 1934; and note the breakaways mentioned in Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 98. Statements on the Revolutionary Policy Committee in the mainstream literature tend towards caricature. See, for instance, David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America: A History* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 241–242; Harry Fleischman, *Norman Thomas: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964), 165; Murray B. Seidler, *Norman Thomas: Respectable Radical* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1967), 115; Frank A. Warren, *An Alternative Vision: The Socialist Party in the 1930s* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1974), 12, 13, 16, 19, 138; Daniel Bell, "The Background and Development of Marxian Socialism in the United States," in Donald Drew Egbert and Stow Persons, eds., *Socialism and American Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), 376–377, 384, 390. More insightful is the brief comment in Goldfield, *The Southern Key*, 93 and, for a fuller discussion that appeared after the completion of this manuscript, Jacob Zumoff, "The Left in the United States and the Decline of the Socialist Party of America, 1934–1935," *Labour/Le Travail*, 85 (Spring 2020), 165–198, esp. 173–176.

hinterland; be much more attractive to the growing numbers of leftist militants, some now aligned with opponent organizations; and might be more likely to effectively penetrate the unions as well as work among the unemployed. In Cannon's view the situation in the United States was ripe for creating a left current that was not only able to exert centralized leadership over a disciplined rank-and-file, but in which the membership at every level was able to exercise its influence through democratic internal discussion and decision-making. This was a crucial point to make to the AWP base, which had been exposed to arguments by Hook and Hardman that the CLA was congenitally flawed by the "sectarianism and factionalism" it had carried over from the Communist Party, while in the AWP there was a tradition of "factions [being] forbidden." Cannon countered that it was highly undemocratic, and in the end destructive, to "ignore" the kind of criticism and discussion that gave rise to factions in the first place.

A League letter was sent to all branches, explaining how fusion could transform the political landscape of possibility for American Trotskyists. National Committee members were dispatched to New England, industrial Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, upstate New York, Chicago, Milwaukee, and the coal fields of Illinois to reinvigorate the CLA memberships, recruit new adherents, and consolidate "additional forces prior to the League entrance into the new party." Cannon and his allies in the CLA leadership peppered *The Militant* with articles advocating fusion, while also airing important differences that demanded resolution. These had been laid out in a 7 September 1934 letter from Swabeck, as CLA Secretary, to the Provisional Organizing Committee of the AWP, in the interest of pushing unity discussions forward. Cannon, with strong backing from Shachtman and Swabeck, forged closer and closer relations with Muste, who was recognized as the single AWP figure possessed of "exceptional personal qualities" which solidified "great influence ... over the people associated with him." This made Muste the AWP's central "leader who balanced everything between the contending sides."⁸³

83 The above paragraphs draw on James P. Cannon, "Discussion with the AWP - 1934," "Speech Notes," Roll 34, JPC Papers; Swabeck to Provisional Organizing Committee, AWP, 7 September 1934, in Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 12 September 1934, #224; "Organizational Campaign of the League in Preparation for New Party," 21 September 1934, #225, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; James P. Cannon, "For the New Party - For the Fusion of the League and the AWP," *The Militant*, 15 September 1934; "Communist League and AWP Move to Form New Party: Both Organizations Declare Desire to Hasten Union of Forces," *The Militant*, 15 September 1934; "American Workers Party Sends Letter on Unity," *The Militant*, 22 September 1934; "Communist League Replies to Letter

The League also approached the AWP about sending delegates to a Chicago Anti-Fascist Congress, where the question of asylum for Trotsky in the United States was to be raised. Cannon and Muste worked out a mutually respectful partnership, addressing dissident Paterson silk workers in the first public meeting held under the joint auspices of the CLA-AWP, a well-attended event that saw the duo do battle with both Stalinists and their Lovestoneite Right Opposition. The former, still spouting Third Period vitriol even at this late date, attacked Muste as a “purveyor of (Oops!) Fascist doctrines” and “a champion of bourgeois nationalism.” Cannon the Communist Party simply dismissed as a “Trotskyist renegade,” warning Muste of the “counter-revolutionary” trap into which he and his followers were being lured. Muste and Shachtman shared the speakers’ podium at a CLA-AWP Irving Plaza “Russian Revolution Anniversary” event on 7 November 1934. At this point the League, which was largely conducting fusion negotiations through its public press for the benefit of the AWP’s proletarian militants, published a “Proposed Program for the New Party,” a detailed exposition of a common class struggle orientation infused with the internationalism of the Left Opposition.⁸⁴

of AWP on Unity,” *The Militant*, 29 September 1934; “Raise New Party Fund! Recruit Sympathizers! Build the League,” *The Militant*, 13 October 1934, which, interestingly, referred to a possible “organic unity”; “Write in J.P. Cannon as Your Vote for the New Party in Elections,” *The Militant*, 20 October 1934; “Proposed Program for the New Party,” *The Militant*, 27 October 1934; Cannon, “For a New Revolutionary Party,” *The Militant*, 17 November 1934; Cannon, “Our Road – the New Party,” *The Militant*, 17 November 1934; “CLA & AWP Head for Fusion: Delegates Meet To Decide on New Party at Conventions,” and “The New Party the Answer to Stalinist Corruption,” *The Militant*, 24 December 1934; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 170–171. For Shachtman’s and Swabeck’s positive views on fusion see “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 240–247; Arne Swabeck, “Unpublished Autobiography,” Chapter 15, Typescript, Autobiographies File, Prometheus Research Library, New York, New York. Swabeck’s criticisms of the AWP appeared in “A Criticism of the Draft Program of the American Workers Party,” *The Militant*, 9 June 1934.

- 84 Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 21 September 1934, #225, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; “Cannon, Muste Address Paterson Silk Workers,” *The Militant*, 6 October 1934; Announcement, “Russian Revolution Anniversary,” *The Militant*, 3 November 1934; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 171, 181–182; Hentoff, *Peace Agitator*, 89–91; Hentoff, ed., *Essays of A.J. Muste*, 163–164; Max Shachtman, “Stalinists in a Panic as Organization of New Party in the US Approaches,” *The Militant*, 27 October 1934; “Proposed Program for the New Party,” *The Militant*, 27 October 1934. Cannon’s speech notes for the Paterson talk are in “Paterson Meeting (with Muste), 1934,” “Speeches File,” Reel 34, JPC Papers. They accented “the need to build the left-wing in the unions and the need to build a party, which CLA and AWP are doing, after 10 years of splits and division in the revolutionary movement.”

The CLA encouraged a number of supporters and less well-known members, particularly the intellectual trio of George Novack, Felix Morrow, and Herbert Solow [Harry Strang] to engage with corresponding figures in the AWP, especially Hook and Burnham. They promoted the idea of a joint convention to formally approve a merger. Solow, who joined the CLA in 1933, was likely sent into the AWP as a “plant.” There were certainly other League members/supporters who participated in Musteite meetings in attempts to push the AWP to the left, and, where possible, advocate joint activities, negotiations and, ultimately, fusion. They also reported back to the CLA on the political ebbs and flows within the AWP, particularly as they related to the merger. A motion moved by Cannon that was unanimously approved by the Resident National Committee in January 1934 proposed that, “we favor the idea of S--- and S--- joining the CPLA and to work exclusively there for a Communist policy, to survey the points where they have organization, and to find out about the possibilities available in regard to the AWP.”⁸⁵

Inside the Musteite organization, influential figures such as Larry Cohen and Anthony Ramuglia, associated with industrial and unemployed organizing, were, if not entirely on side with the CLA, at least inclined to see a fusion with the Trotskyists as a step forward. They were supported by a layer of AWPers that included Art Preis, Sam Pollack, Ted Selander, Morris Chertov, and Anne Chester. These Musteite militants played a crucial role in firming up Muste’s positive assessment of fusion. Cohen perhaps exemplified the pro-CLA position within AWP discussions:

The main arguments against fusion today have been the CLA’s inability to do mass work; the fact that the CLA puts too much emphasis on Russian questions; and the CLA’s neglect of the American Approach. In the past year the CLA has been in the Hotel and Truck Drivers strikes. In view of our miserable showing in the former, we had better not talk too much about it, except to mention that if Field was guilty of the fiasco, as we have generally assumed, the CLA had the courage to act boldly towards

85 Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 54, citing George Novack, “A.J. and American Trotskyism,” *Liberation* (September – October 1967), 22; Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 105; Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 18 January 1934, #203, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers. Felix Morrow wrote a substantive three-part critique of the AWP: Morrow, “A Critical Analysis of the American Workers Party,” *The Militant*, 19 May 1934; 26 May 1934; 2 June 1934. Solow’s date of joining the CLA is established in [Swabeck?] to Dear Comrades, 8 December 1936, in Socialist Party Entry, Workers Party, Summer 1935/November – December 1936, Chrono File, Folder WP: 1–14 December 1936, Prometheus Research Library, New York, New York.

him. I have nothing to say about Minneapolis. I leave it to the experts on Mass Work to point out that it came at an unfortunate time. As to Russian questions, it has curiously been the anti-fusionists who have done all the talking about Russia to-day and every day. Neither Hook, Burnham, or I continue to bring up Russia; it's always Hardman, Budenz, Howe. But I want to say that the comrades who oppose a study of events in the revolutionary movement over the last decade are proposing that we enter the American battlefield with one eye blind-folded and one arm bound behind our backs. The study of events in China, Germany, yes, and in America, is proposed not as an escape from the American class struggle but to outfit us for it. Comrades who charge the CLA with neglecting the American Approach are first of all invited to define it; secondly invited to inspect the files of the Minneapolis *Organizer*; and finally reminded that American workers have the same enemy as workers everywhere; that the central contradictions of capitalist society are everywhere the same; and that fundamentally the workers' solution is everywhere the same as well. I wish to say also that it comes with ill grace from the comrades who charge that we must become Trotskyites to suggest that the CLA members apply to the AWP one by one. I have already accepted Trotsky's ideas, as has our Party as a whole; to pause now means that matters of personal position and prestige are more important than matters of principle. In this regard I can say only that comrades may hope that if we fail to merge we will win over the CLA's members, but that if the failure is on our shoulders, honest workers in and out of the AWP will find themselves instead drawn to the CLA.

Ramuglia, a Brookwood graduate and President of the AWP's National Unemployed League, insisted that ending fusion discussions would "reveal a lack of character on our part." Stressing that, "There is no impasse on the program, for we've as yet received no definitive refusal on the part of the CLA to our proposed changes in the draft," Ramuglia suggested, "Despite all our talk about factionalism, it is now appearing in the AWP. We have no right to pose the AWP as **the** Party. I am not an AWP patriot I favor unity with the CLA not because they own a printing press, but because there are no principled differences between us, and questions of posts and offices must not obscure political questions." He deplored the tendency of some AWP leaders to vote for merger in one conference only to then hurry "to undertake factional activity," noting that, "I think merger is everywhere accepted," citing endorsement of fusion in AWP branches in Dickson City, Philadelphia, and Allentown. Combined with positions put forward by Hook and Burnham, such argument helped tilt

discussions within the AWP's Provisional Organizing Committee toward endorsing a joint conference.⁸⁶

The CLA's reasonable approach to the terms of fusion helped smooth the path to merger. Cannon and his fellow CLAers advocated sharing of leadership positions and allocating editorial positions equally. They also agreed to shift a League conference scheduled for Chicago to New York to accommodate the AWP. On naming the new organization, the Trotskyist League conceded something to the Musteites with acceptance of the designation, Workers Party [WP]. Oehler was not enthusiastic about such developments, but the rest of the CLA leadership proved supportive and enthusiastic. Muste and Cannon finalized a draft programmatic statement to be submitted to the National Committees of both the CLA and the AWP. These two leaders, now working in tandem, could not be sure how their efforts would be received in their respective organizations. Cannon, cognizant of opposition within the National Committee of the CLA, was tiring of Abern who, "as always, was maneuvering furtively in the dark, monkey wrench in hand." For his part, Muste, instinctually more reticent about using his influence than was Cannon, was not certain he would be able to carry a majority of the AWP into fusion.

Separate conferences of the AWP and the CLA were scheduled for the end of November, where the membership would get the opportunity to finally discuss the fusion and hammer out any difficulties over political policies. These two gatherings would then be followed by a proposed two-day convention of ratification, 1–2 December 1934, at which the merger would be voted up or down. *The Militant* hailed the prospect of new revolutionary possibilities for the most advanced layers of the working masses:

What force exists capable of guiding them from the everyday battles to their fundamental class need, the overthrow of capitalism, the establishment of socialism? Only that organization having absorbed the experiences of its past, is based on the granite foundation of revolutionary internationalism, and merges Marxism with the masses in motion can serve such a function. In our times, such a party must strive to build the Fourth International, the world party of revolution.⁸⁷

86 American Workers Party, "Report of Special National POC Meeting Held in NYC, 6 November 1934," Typescript 9pp., Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers.

87 The above paragraphs draw on A.J. Muste, "Confidential Memo to Out of Town POC Members," 10 October 1934, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 180–182; Myers, *Prophet Armed*, 93–94; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 245–248; Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 12 September 1934, #224;

In the end both the AWP and the CLA agreed to fuse. Eighty delegates from the two organizations – 50 from the former Left Opposition, 30 from the Musteites – convened at New York's Stuyvesant Casino on Second Avenue where they christened the birth of a new revolutionary party with the singing of the Internationale. Cannon and Muste raised clenched fists as a salute to the new Workers Party, proud advocates of "Minneapolis and Toledo, exemplifying the new militancy of the American working class, ... the stars that presided over its birth."⁸⁸

The Workers Party was not affiliated with any other groups, parties, or organizations, either in the United States or internationally, so it was not part of Trotsky's International Communist League. However, the *Declaration of Principles and Constitution of the Workers Party of the U.S.* stipulated that its National Committee was "empowered to enter into fraternal relations" with political bodies in other countries if they stood on the same "fundamental program," cooperating with them to create a "new revolutionary International." This decision, reflecting the differing orientations of the AWP and the CLA, represented a principled compromise that would allow the fusion of the Musteites and the League to consolidate and develop. In this process, Cannon, Shachtman, and others in the old League saw bright prospects for the constituencies of the two organizations coming closer together in preparing for the launching of the Fourth International. Those CLAers dubious about the revolutionary substance of the centrist AWP, such as Oehler, no doubt embraced this compromise with the expectation that it would expose the political instabilities at the core of merger. Perhaps they also welcomed the option of keeping some distance from an international Trotskyist movement that they considered had gone off its Bolshevik-Leninist rails with the French turn.⁸⁹

A.J. assumed the post of National Chairman of the fused party, with Cannon the editor of the organization's weekly newspaper, dubbed *The New Militant*; Shachtman and Burnham [John West] edited the theoretical monthly, the *New International*. The opening session of the fusion conference was chaired

28 October 1934, #232; 29 October 1934, #233; 8 November 1934, #234; 19 November 1934, #235, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; "Arrangements Completed for National Convention to Launch New Party in US," *The Militant*, 3 November 1934.

88 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 188; "Launch Workers Party of US: CLA and AWP in Fusion Convention of US Revolutionaries," *The Militant*, 8 December 1934. For the notes of Cannon's speech to the CLA November 1934 Convention see James P. Cannon, "CLA Convention – 1934," Roll 34, JPC Paper.

89 *Declaration of Principles and Constitution of the Workers Party U.S.* (1935), quoted in Prometheus Research Library reprint, Max Shachtman, *Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?* 11–12.

by Vincent Ray Dunne, leader of the Minneapolis teamsters' uprising, while the closing session was presided over by Sam Pollack, a key organizer in the Toledo Auto-Lite strikes and a leading force in the Unemployed Leagues of Ohio and Illinois. After passing resolutions in defense of Tom Mooney and aboriginal teamster militant, Happy Holstein, whom "the hangmen of the Citizen's Alliance of Minneapolis [were] trying to frame on a murder charge," the convention launched the Non-Partisan Labor Defense. Finally, three reports were accepted: Shachtman's on party building; Swabeck's on trade unions; and Ramuglia's on work among the unemployed. It was, in Cannon's words, "a fifty-fifty arrangement, all up and down the line," although Cannon and Shachtman were careful to control editorial posts. The two pioneer Trotskyists appreciated that Muste and the AWP, with an "overemphasis on purely organizational matters," were likely to be more interested in the party machinery, but they considered the most important thing to be "the ideology of the movement." Nonetheless, the leadership was shared equitably: the 22-member National Executive of the Workers Party was composed of 11 from each of the founding organizations.⁹⁰

Muste wrote the statement in the *New International* announcing the formation of the new Workers Party. Written in the language of the AWP, it largely expressed the politics of the CLA. Cannon would have found little to quibble with in Muste's assertion that the fusion of the activist/national AWP with the theoretical/international CLA was entirely natural, particularly as the text endorsed both theory and internationalism, while highlighting the primacy of trade union work and the importance of labor defense:

the point of the revolutionary internationalism of the C.L.A. has been that it is a fatal error to make the laying of the foundations of the socialist economy in the Soviet Union the almost exclusive concern of the revolutionary movement; that the defense of the Soviet Union itself today depends upon the growth and victory of the revolutionary parties in the capitalist countries and that energy must be concentrated on that task. ... The trade union issue is the master issue in the United States today. By the manner in which it meets that issue the Workers Party will justify or stultify itself in the initial period of its existence. ... In certain more sophisticated quar-

⁹⁰ Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 180–181; "Launch Workers Party of US: CLA and AWP in Fusion Convention of US Revolutionaries," *The Militant*, 8 December 1934. On Shachtman's particular concern with the *New International* see Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 12 September 1934. #224, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers.

ters of the labor movement, there are those who do not see what is plain to the capitalists and politicians on the one hand and the working masses on the other. The avowed social democrats and the unavowed ones, including some of those who regard themselves as devotees of the "American Approach," think of course that the class struggle is fought primarily and mainly at the polls. One of them recently remarked that Upton Sinclair in his EPIC campaign for governor of California had carried the class struggle in that state to the highest point it had ever reached, and did not even mention the marine workers' strike that raged up and down the Pacific coast last summer, and the general strike in the San Francisco area! No, not Upton on his soap box, but Tom Mooney in jail is still the symbol of the class struggle in California. At the other extreme are doctrinaires and Leftists to whom the unions, especially those in the A.F. of L. are company unions, Fascist unions, "bulwarks of capitalism," etc. Until recently at least the C.P. held to this estimate and proceeded to do its utmost to divide the working class by building its own sectarian, paper "industrial" unions. ... To reject these attitudes does not mean that we accept the present leadership of the A.F. of L., its structure, its policies, its attitude towards employers and government. For the Marxist that is even more impossible than it was at an earlier period. ... The class collaborationist philosophy becomes more dangerous as the capitalist crisis deepens, will prove fatal if it prevails as that crisis reaches its climax.

Muste ended his article with the rallying cry: "Thus with confidence and determination we address ourselves to the task of building the Left-progressive wing in the unions – building the Workers Party of the U.S. – building the new, the Fourth, International!" If the founder of the Conference for Progressive Labor Action's allusion to left-progressivism suggested a continuity with his recent past, his embrace of the Fourth International at least indicated a willingness to promote the revolutionary internationalist perspective long characteristic of his Trotskyist comrades.⁹¹

Unification of the CLA and the AWP more than doubled (and possibly tripled) the number of revolutionaries who Cannon led, and considerably expanded the periphery with which he interacted. The total following of the fused Workers Party, including former CLA and AWP members, as well as close supporters in the Unemployed Leagues, was estimated at well over 1,000.

91 A.J. Muste, "The Workers Party is Founded," *New International*, 1 (December 1934), 129–130.

Practical work, as Muste suggested, would reveal the ongoing strengths of the 1934 fusion or expose the fractured failure of the undertaking.

In a speech to the founding mass meeting of the Workers Party in December 1934, Cannon played with the duality that had animated many fusion discussions: nationalism/internationalism. Capitalism, he argued, having reached its zenith in the United States, was Americanizing Europe. But Marxism was penetrating America. "Our aim," Cannon stressed, "is to take the great system of ideas known as Marxism to the American workers in their own language." The preconditions for revolution were present in the United States, "all that is needed is the consciousness." Pointing to the significance of the Russian Revolution as the guiding star of American revolutionaries, Cannon could proudly claim that "not a few of the founders of American Communism are also founders of our new party." United with those CPLAers, who had ignited the Toledo strike and built the Unemployed Leagues, the communists who sided with the Left Opposition had taken a different path into the Workers Party, but the two streams had been tending in the same direction. "Our paths crossed and became the same," said Cannon, "let us hope not to part again." For the party these different groupings had formed was "the carrier of [the working class] consciousness" that could "conquer the 48 states," building a new International capable of taking "the entire world" by revolutionary storm. At the end of 1934, looking back on the year's efforts, in so many different spheres, Cannon saw the fusion as "absolutely indispensable for the regroupment and consolidation of the workers' vanguard" that was a necessary precondition for the American Revolution, which was to be indispensable in the making of the World Revolution.⁹²

5 Building the Party amid Fusion's Fallouts

The newly-formed Workers Party [WP] wasted no time getting down to business. December 1934 was largely taken up with meetings of the National and Political Committees, addressing practical issues: creating bank accounts and assigning financial responsibilities; establishing a headquarters, book store, printing facilities, and branch offices; determining the nature and policy of the press; assigning committee responsibilities. One important task was to determine an orientation toward other leftist groups, including the Socialist Party

92 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 189–190; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 95, 113; James P. Cannon, "Speech at Founding Mass Meeting of Workers Party, Germania Hall, New York, December 1934," "Speech Notes," Roll 34, JPC Papers.

and the Communist Party. Muste was charged with organizing fraction work in these bodies and developing a general "program of action."⁹³ Collaboration with the CP presented something of a minefield. There were some problems in old Musteite strongholds such as Allentown, Pennsylvania, where working out how to conduct relations with the Stalinists without becoming embroiled in common activities that compromised the political integrity of the new Workers Party proved an ongoing difficulty.⁹⁴

Ambitions nevertheless ran high. There were plans to double party membership within six months. Muste initiated correspondence with the Michigan-based Proletarian Party to enter into discussion of "further unification of the revolutionary forces," and the *New Militant* reported with enthusiasm on new recruits from other ostensible revolutionary organizations. The WP committed itself to establish a \$5,000 "Party Foundation Fund" within six months, to upping the paid-circulation of the *New Militant* to 10,000 and the *New International* to 6,000, and to embarking on a formidable pamphlet publication project. Organizers were to be dispatched across the country to kick-start "a national Party educational system" under the direction of Hugo Oehler. Illinois, in particular, was targeted as an area where many WP locals might be formed, drawing particularly on discontents within the Socialist Party and a perceived impending exodus of militants from the reform body. Indeed, the continuing ferment in the SP was seen as fortuitous for the WP, which party enthusiasts thought "a center of unity ... founded at precisely the right moment." Activism among the jobless was given specific attention, and work in the Unemployed Leagues was seen as complementing efforts to develop an organized left-wing in the trade unions.⁹⁵

93 Workers Party, National Committee, Minutes, 3 December 1934; Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 5 December 1934; 10 December 1934; Workers Party, "Report of Special Sub Committee on Editorial Policy and Style of New Militant"; 10 January 1935; 16 February 1935; 25 March 1935; 28 March 1935; 1 April 1935, Roll 11, Reel 3354; Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers.

94 Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 10 January 1935, with attachment, "Recommendation on C.P. Fraction Work"; 13 January 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers. A coherent collection of Workers Party, Minutes, Political Committee reveals an ongoing concern over Allentown, from the beginning of the formation of the Workers Party. See, for instance, Workers Party, Minutes, Political Committee, 10 January 1935, 13 January 1935; Folder 2; Minutes, Political Committee, 18 February 1934, Folder 3; "Resolution on the Allentown Situation: The WP and Opponent Organizations," attached to Minutes, Political Committee, 28 October 1935, Folder 11; Minutes, Political Committee, 11 November 1935, Folder 13; Minutes, Political Committee, 30 December 1935, Folder 14; Minutes, Political Committee, 8 January 1936, Folder 17, PRL, Workers Library, Political Committee.

95 Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 779; Workers Party, National Committee, Minutes,

For the first time, American Trotskyists appeared to have a real opportunity to interact with African American workers. Cannon proposed and the Political Committee of the Workers Party agreed, that Simon Williamson, a black CLA member from Kansas City elected as a delegate to the New York convention late in 1934, head up a Workers Party effort to build a revolutionary presence in Harlem. At a 10 December 1934 meeting of the WP's Political Committee, Cannon's proposal that the New York District assume financial responsibility for maintaining the black revolutionary was accepted. As we saw in a previous chapter, Williamson had written articles in the *Militant* late in 1934 critical of the Stalinist Black Belt Nation thesis, and Cannon was clearly enthusiastic about the possibility of building a base among African Americans. A report on the activities of the New York District of the Workers Party from 15 December 1935 to 15 May 1936 noted that, "From the very outset we realized the need of doing work among the Negro masses of New York as one of the main tasks of the Party. We have retained Comrade Williamson here, assigning him the function of a special Negro organizer in Harlem. We intended at the outset to carry on a financial campaign to make it possible for us to pay Comrade Williamson whatever would be necessary in addition to getting him on relief."⁹⁶

3 December 1934; Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 5 December 1934; 10 December 1934, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers; Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, "Outline for Education Department of the Workers Party," 22 December 1934; Political Committee, Minutes, "Unemployed Work," 12 December 1934, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 96–102; Cannon, "The New Militant," 15 December 1934, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *The Communist League of America, 1932–1934: James P. Cannon, Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 380–381; "Muste Calls for Funds to Carry on Mass Work," and "Joseph Zack, CP Leader, Joins Workers Party," *New Militant*, 22 December 1934; "Norris, SP Leader, Joins Workers Party," "WP to Open Training School to Fight Capitalism," and "Prepare for a Year of Determined Struggle," *New Militant*, 29 December 1934; "St. Louis Socialist Finds Workers Party is Relevant," *New Militant*, 9 February 1935; "Party Lists Six Pamphlets," *New Militant*, 12 January 1935; Louis Breier, "The Leagues Fight for Unity," and "Progressives Seek National Organization," *New Militant*, 2 February 1935; Elmer Cope, "United Opposition Needed Against Tighe: Lack of Preparation Brought Recent Progressive Movement in Steel to Disaster," and "How the AFL Actually Betrayed the Automobile Workers," *New Militant*, 16 February 1935; "NUL Plans Caravan to Washington," *New Militant*, 2 March 1935. Evidence of the importance placed on the Unemployed Leagues in the early history of the Workers Party can be gleaned from the organization's Political Committee Minutes, usefully gathered together in the Prometheus Research Library File labeled "Workers Party Political Committee Minutes, National Convention Minutes, 1934–1937." See especially Minutes, Political Committee, 5 December 1935 (Folder 1); "Report on Unemployed Conference, 3–4 January 1935," attached to Minutes, Political Committee, 7 January 1935.

⁹⁶ For this history of Williamson I am in part indebted to the unpublished lecture notes of Christopher Phelps, "African American Revolutionary Socialists, 1928–1956," presented at The Legacy of Leon Trotsky and US Trotskyism Conference, Fordham University, New

Subsequently, Williamson apparently claimed to have been a reluctant conscript to the WP's Harlem endeavors. He extracted a commitment that he could return to Kansas City if things did not pan out. Well aware that the CLA had been groping for an adequate position on the "Negro Question" for years, Williamson was frustrated by the Workers Party's reluctance to move its Harlem branch from a predominantly German district (in Yorkville) to the African American section of West Harlem. He expressed doubts that important work was being done among the Germans, claiming that none of his Trotskyist colleagues "had ever contacted the Germans, not even knowing the language." It took three weeks of debate, according to Williamson, to convince the Workers Party to relocate to West Harlem and two more weeks to set up a headquarters. Williamson was then given to understand that when it came time to develop working relations with Harlem's African Americans, he would be doing the contact work largely on his own. Along with two WP members, Sylvan Pollack and Pauline Miller, Williamson set up the Interracial Club as a vehicle of recruitment and embarked on the difficult task of developing a "center for his work." Oehler reported to a February 1935 Political Committee meeting that Williamson was at work on a document dealing with "certain phases of the Negro problem, especially the exposure of the numerous Negro utopian organizations." Once the draft was completed it was to be submitted to the Political Committee for approval. A beginning clearly had been made, but it had been tough slogging.⁹⁷

Untangling the problems associated with Williamson's Harlem political work may well now be impossible. There is no question that an emerging factional division pitting Hugo Oehler, Tom Stamm, and Louis Basky against Cannon, Shachtman, and others played a role in Williamson's functioning and how he was regarded by the majority New York leadership.⁹⁸ Early in Willi-

York, New York, 25 July 2008. See also, "Report of Activity of the New York District, Workers Party of the U.S. From December 15, 1935 to May 15, 1936," 8, Box 42, Folder 10, GB Papers, and for Cannon's role in orchestrating the transfer of Williamson from Kansas City to New York, with the responsibility of overseeing the Workers Party's political initiatives among African Americans in Harlem, Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 10 December 1934, Folder 1, "Workers Party, Political Committee Minutes, Attachments, and Circular Letters, 1934," in File, "Workers Party Political Committee Minutes, National Convention Minutes, 1934-1937," Prometheus Research Library, WP, Political Committee, New York, New York [hereafter PRL].

97 Phelps, "African American Revolutionary Socialists, 1928-1956." See also Workers Party, Political Committee Minutes, 13 February 1935; 25 March 1935, Folders 3 & 4, "Workers Party: Political Committee Minutes, Attachments, and Circular Letters," in PRL.

98 At the same time as Williamson attempted to establish a Workers Party presence in Harlem, Oehlerite factionalism boiled over. See, for instance, Minutes of the Pittsburgh Plen-

amson's Harlem tenure, on 19 March 1935, a riot erupted that devastated the area bounded by 120th and 138th streets and Fifth and St. Nicolas Avenues. Harlem residents smashed store windows, looted, and clashed with police, leaving one dead, many seriously wounded, and more than 200 injured or arrested. The outbreak was triggered by the rumor that a youth had been killed after his arrest for shoplifting at a store targeted in a Harlem job crusade for refusing to hire black clerks. The Communist Party, including African American James Ford, had substantial roots in Harlem, unlike Williamson and his weak and (in his view) vacillating white Trotskyist comrades. The immediate aftermath of the March street battle in Harlem, moreover, boosted the Communist Party's stature in the eyes of the black population, which saw through the campaign launched by the police, the Manhattan District Attorney, and the Hearst press. These reactionary forces blamed the riotous violence on "red agitators." The Trotskyist alternative in Harlem seemed stalled as the Communist Party, which stood up to red-baiting adversaries, gained legitimacy in the eyes of more politically-inclined blacks, who rallied to the defense of the beleaguered Stalinists. Seemingly unable to appreciate what Williamson was up against, the WP's Political Committee expressed concern that he had been unable to make much headway in Harlem.⁹⁹

Six days after the Harlem riots erupted, Cannon and Williamson's Oehlerite factional ally, Tom Stamm, put forward counter-posed motions within the Political Committee. Cannon's call to "conduct an investigation ... proceeding from the position that all work in Harlem is to be done from the Harlem branch under the supervision of the D.C." was passed. By May of 1935 the Workers Party leadership had set up a committee to investigate why Williamson was not achieving more in Harlem. Acknowledging that the leadership failed to raise "the sum we set for ourselves" to further Williamson's work, the Political Committee nonetheless stated somewhat defensively that "we nevertheless did our utmost to live up to our obligation as best we could." Williamson clearly thought

ary Session, NC, WP, 15 March 1935; Minutes, Political Committee, 28 March 1935, Folder 4; Minutes, Political Committee, 1 April 1935, Folder 5; Minutes, Political Committee, 13 May 1935; Minutes, Political Committee, 20 May 1935; Minutes, Political Committee, 22 May 1935, Folder 6; Minutes, Political Committee, 3 June 1935; Minutes Political Committee, 10 June 1935, Folder 7; Minutes, Political Committee, 8 July 1935; Minutes, Political Committee, 29 July 1935, Folder 8, GB Papers.

99 See, for instance, the discussion of the Harlem riot and its aftermath in Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana, Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1983), esp. 140–159; and coverage in "Behind the Harlem Events," *The Militant*, 30 March 1935.

this inadequate, and internal reports indicated that, “from the very outset friction developed between Comrade Williamson and the Harlem branch.”

Williamson wrote a series of valuable articles in the *New Militant* on the history of Negro labor, race and colonialism, and cultural developments in Harlem, in which he argued that the oppression of the African American masses could not successfully be challenged on the basis of “color,” but rather through the pursuit of class struggles. The riots that broke out in Harlem a month-and-a-half later prompted the WP leadership to seriously grapple with how best to build united front mobilizations that would effectively advance working-class solidarity against the race discrimination, segregation, disease, unemployment, high rents, and other factors that precipitated the uprising. While rejecting a “nationalist form” for addressing these issues, what the Trotskyists were saying was not a great deal different than James Ford and the Communist Party, whose influence dwarfed that of the WP and Williamson.

The Workers Party’s perspective on the “so-called riots” was put forward in a leaflet, 7500 copies of which were distributed. Williamson and the African American journalist, Ernest Rice McKinney, a veteran organizer for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as well as unemployed agitator in the Conference for Progressive Labor Action, were assigned to attend meetings in Harlem called by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., then emerging as a notable civil rights activist. At the same time, however, Shachtman led a charge in the WP Political Committee, challenging the CP’s adaptation to black nationalism. He insisted on the need to champion “working-class solidarity against capitalism, Negro or white,” and criticized what the Trotskyist pioneer claimed was Stalinism’s “responsibility in part for [the] emergence of nationalism.” Muste revived interest in Shachtman’s unpublished manuscript on “Communism and the Negro,” suggesting that it should be “investigated immediately as to suitability for a pamphlet.”¹⁰⁰

100 The above paragraphs draw on Phelps, “African American Revolutionary Socialists, 1928–1956,” which addresses Williamson as well as McKinney; Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 10 December 1934, Roll 11, Reel 3354; 12 February 1935; 25 March 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers; Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 25 March 1935, Folder 4, PRL, WP, Political Committee; “Report of Activity of New York District, Workers Party of the U.S., From December 15, 1934 to May 15, 1936,” 8–9, Box 42, Folder 10, GB Papers. Simon Williamson’s articles included: “Negro Workers in the Early American Labor Movement,” *New Militant*, 22 December 1934; “How the Middle Class Led ‘Freed’ Negroes After the Civil War,” *New Militant*, 5 January 1935; “Booker T. Washington – He Pleased the Bourgeoisie,” *New Militant*, 2 February 1935; “The Pacific Movement: Japanese Imperialism Stirs Up Race Hatred in America,” *New Militant*, 16 March 1935; “Behind the Harlem Events,” *New Militant*, 30 March 1935; “The ‘Gods’ Clash in Harlem,” *New Militant*, 13 April 1935; “The Negro Work-

Williamson's *New Militant* articles promoted an appreciation of little-known episodes of black working-class militancy. He detailed the broad vision of "Negro working-class leader," Wesley Howard, who addressed an 1869 Baltimore Convention of Colored Labor, insisting that "the franchise without the organization of labor would be of little or no benefit." Howard, unlike the more celebrated Frederick Douglass, never joined with what Williamson designated "opulent whites" who controlled the Republican Party that the famous black abolitionist championed. Chronicling the American Federation of Labor's overtly racist record of implementing color bars and segregationist practices, Williamson depicted black leaders like Booker T. Washington, as well as craft unionists of Samuel Gompers' ilk, as obstacles to the progress of African American workers.

From the end of the Civil War through the subsequent Reconstruction period, black workers actively sought to participate in the class conflicts of their times. They played an important role in both the Knights of Labor and the first May Day celebrations in honor of the Haymarket martyrs of 1886. "Despite the setbacks of black labor the specter of [Wesley] Howard's foresight and militancy is hovering over black America again and neither Negro middle class reaction nor white bourgeois chicanery can stop it from taking form," claimed Williamson. The black revolutionary seldom missed an opportunity to pillory those who would curb what he insisted was the class struggle inclination of the Negro working-class and tenant farmers. Arguing that all of "the prejudices of the Bourbon South" had to be jettisoned "before large sections of the Negro workers of the South will enter the ranks of organized labor in a struggle to annihilate capitalism," Williamson repeatedly hammered home the message that, "Oppression of the Negro is the result of economic conditions." When a Pacific Movement, instigated by Japanese imperialism, appealed to the "darker races" to oppose whites, Williamson exposed the imperialist history of Japan's attempted economic conquests throughout the Far East and into Russia. He summoned "class solidarity, the unity of all workers, black, white, yellow and red in the struggle against all capitalists, Japanese, American, regardless of their color."

Williamson considered such multi-racial class unity to be the only antidote to the deprivation and despair all too evident in Depression-era Harlem. Negro misleaders of labor, dubbed by Williamson "agents of Tammany or Fusion," did little more than "Spread confusion, utopian and quack ideas," while religious

ers' Role in Past May Day Struggles," *New Militant*, 27 April 1935; "The Negro and American Labor: The Color Line in the AFL," *New Militant*, 13 July 1935.

charlatans like Father Divine, Mother Horn, or Elder Michaux further muddied the currents of genuine oppositional politics in Harlem. Urging Negro and white workers to unite in common struggle, Williamson proclaimed confidently, "You have nothing to lose but your oppression – your chains!"¹⁰¹

Labor defense work, through the Non-Partisan Labor Defense [NPLD], reinforced this same struggle for working-class unity. It was given a high priority. As we have seen in an earlier chapter, Cannon announced success in preventing the deportation of Antonio Bellussi, an antifascist activist, and winning the release from Sing-Sing of Harold Robins and Andres Gras, victims of a frame-up conviction for assaulting scabs in the New York hotel strike. Felix Morrow, George Novack, and Herbert Solow, mainstays of the NPLD, fought on behalf of class war advocates such as the Tampa, Florida militant, Joseph Shoemaker, who was kidnapped, lashed, and tarred and feathered by a masked gang of vigilantes in early 1935. Sixteen Fargo, North Dakota truck drivers convicted of rioting during a strike that took place in the context of an organizing drive spearheaded by Minneapolis Trotskyist Miles Dunne, also benefitted from the defense efforts of the Workers Party. The NPLD's most celebrated case involved Norman Mini, a leader of Sacramento's Stalinist Third Period Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union [AWIU], who had broken with the Communist Party and joined Muste's AWP before being charged, along with his former CP comrades and some members of the Industrial Workers of the World, with violations of California's draconian criminal syndicalist legislation. With the CP's International Labor Defense in charge of the defense of all of those victimized, Mini, now a convert to Trotskyism, found himself isolated and denigrated, denounced as a "stool pigeon" by the AWIU. The NPLD supported Mini, defending him against both the repressive bourgeois legal charges and the scurrilous attacks of the Stalinists.¹⁰²

101 Quotes from Williamson articles in the above paragraphs are from the *New Militant*, cited in footnote above.

102 On NPLD activity in this period see Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 199; Cannon, "Non-Partisan Defense," 15 December 1934, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *The Communist League of America, 1932–1934: James P. Cannon, Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 382–383; Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, "Bellussi Case," and "The Bellussi Case," 11 January 1934; 29 May 1934, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; Miles B. Dunne to James P. Cannon, Fargo, 20 December 1934, Reel 3, JPC Papers; "United Defense Acts to Mobilize Labor in California Trial," *New Militant*, 26 January 1935; "Liberty of 18 Jeopardized as C.P. Splits Defense," *New Militant*, 2 February 1935; "NPLD Statement in Sacramento Case," and "Fantastic Evidence Used by State in Labor Trial," *New Militant*, 9 February 1935; "CP's Attack on Mini Decried in Sacramento," *New Militant*, 16 February 1935; James P. Cannon, "The Truth About Sacramento," "16 Sentenced for 'Riot' in Fargo; Labor Aroused," and "Mini on Stand Gives Lie to 'Stool Pigeon' Charge," *New Militant*, 2 March 1935; Norman

This Workers Party activity was given a public, national face by Cannon and Muste. They embarked in January 1935 on a two-month tour that took them to Canada and more than twenty American cities from the eastern seaboard to California, from southern mill towns to northwest states such as Idaho, along with a number of speaking dates in the industrial cities of Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and Chicago. Cannon and Muste shared podiums in Illinois coal towns and the old League stronghold of Minneapolis-St. Paul, where comrades honored the two speakers with a banquet and new suits of clothes. The theme of their talk was the formation of the new party, its relationship to the American scene and its attitude to events in Russia. They discussed the assassination of Stalinist functionary Sergei Kirov by a minor figure in the Soviet apparatus, which Stalin falsely attributed to "Trotskyite" agents, using the murder as a pretext for intensified political repression. Trotsky wrote extensively on the Kirov assassination, and its meaning was addressed extensively in the WP press.

The Cannon-Muste tour included private meetings with the WP membership and sympathizers, as well as public forums. In Los Angeles, Cannon spoke at a meeting of WP supporters. He focused on how the CLA-AWP fusion represented a turning away from a decade of revolutionary disintegration, in which splits and fractures had weakened the American left and theoretical disputes often degenerated into sectarian squabbles. Championing the method followed in the fusion, which put program first, and addressed differences of principle openly, Cannon detailed the "program of action" the united forces of the merged CLA-AWP had agreed upon through frank discussion and criticism conducted in joint committees and in the press of the two bodies.

The speaking tour revealed to Cannon the enthusiasm with which militant workers across America greeted the fusion. He used the opportunity to address critical international perspectives, outlining the concept of the French turn and developments inside the Soviet Union, but detailing, as well, the Amer-

Mini, "Criminal Syndicalist or Renegade," *New Militant*, 23 March 1935; "NPLD Pushes Campaign for Mini Freedom," *New Militant*, 15 June 1935; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 103, 175-177; Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 7 January 1935; 10 January 1935; 13 January 1935; 11 February 1935; 28 March 1935; A.J. Muste, "The Non-Partisan Labor Defense," 6 March 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers. See, as well, Workers Party, Minutes, Political Committee, 7 January 1935; Felix Morrow, Resolution of the Secretariat of the Political Committee on the Policy of the Sacramento Case, Minutes, Political Committee, 10 January 1935, Folder 2; Minutes, Political Committee, 21 February 1935, Folder 3; A.J. Muste, "The Non-Partisan Labor Defense," 6 March 1935, Folder 4, all in PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee. A year-long summary of the NPLD activities appears in "The Non-Partisan Labor Defense: A Year of Activity, Success, and Service to the Working Class on all Fronts of the Radical and Labor Movement," *New Militant*, 30 November 1935.

ican situation and how the crisis tendencies of capitalism, so obvious during the Great Depression, generated the threats of fascism and war which menaced working class well-being. "Only one force can arrest the present trend," Cannon stressed, "the intervention of the working class." This he counter-posed to the End Poverty in California [EPIC] scheme of Upton Sinclair and the political deficiencies of the Socialist and Communist Parties. Drawing on his knowledge of the struggles of the Wobblies in California's agricultural sector, Cannon described the deplorable conditions faced by bindle stiffs, harvest hands, and other seasonal workers. He used this as background to a discussion of the Sacramento criminal syndicalist charges against Norman Mini, the principled fight against the frame-up, and the bankruptcy of the CP's partisan and therefore highly partial labor defense commitments. Cannon also conveyed the good wishes of Tom Mooney, who he visited in prison. Exhorting Workers Party supporters to "fear not the stubborn struggle," avoid compromising with opportunists, and stand on the granite of Marxist principles, Cannon insisted that "our day is drawing near." He closed with the message that the essential task of the moment was to build the revolutionary party that alone could "lead the American workers to ... victory." After the tour, in late March 1935, Cannon delivered the same message to a mass meeting at New York's Irving Plaza.¹⁰³

Cannon projected an unbounded optimism, based on the substantial accomplishments recorded in 1934 with the summer victories in the final teamsters' strike and the successful CLA-AWP fusion in December. But privately it seems that he had a sense that some difficult challenges lay ahead. There are suggestions that, in the context of his rebuilding of relations with Shachtman during their joint work over the course of the New York hotel strike, the Minneapolis struggles and the launching of the *Northwest Organizer*, and the CLA-Musteite fusion, he faced new and disturbingly embittered outbreaks of factionalism. Political differentiations would, yet again, leave him separated from comrades with whom he once worked intimately in trusted alliance.

103 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 197–198; James P. Cannon, "The WP & Kirov, Irving Plaza, 23 December 1934," "Speech Notes," Roll 34, JPC Papers; "Muste Cannon Tour," and "Workers Party Leaders Off on Speaking Tour," *New Militant*, 12 January 1935; "Muste, Cannon in Canada: Find Workers Party Active There," *New Militant*, 19 January 1935; "Across the Country with Cannon and Muste," *New Militant*, 2 February 1935; "Cannon, Rorty, and Chas Malamuth Will Tell of California Terror," *New Militant*, 23 March 1935; A.J. Muste, "Why Join the Workers Party: Letters to a Worker Correspondent," *New Militant*, 9 March 1935; 16 March 1935; 30 March 1935; James P. Cannon, "Report to Sympathizers Meeting, Los Angeles, 16 February 1935," "Speech Notes," Roll 34, JPC Papers; A.J. Muste to All Branches, "Important Memo on Cannon-Muste Tour and Related Matters," 8 January 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers.

It seems that Cannon still thought it necessary during this period to watch his political back. Glotzer reported gossip from Chicago of Cannon telling a young comrade that, “the internal situation in the League was not over and it wouldn’t be over until we were finished with the louses.” Cannon tended to retreat into drink when faced with an ongoing and, to him, insurmountable political crisis. According to Glotzer, Cannon made his despairing and disparaging statement when he was drunk, and he added that the CLA leader was “steadily plastered” during an entire return trip from Minneapolis to New York in September 1934.¹⁰⁴

The Glotzer-Spector-Abern dissidents operated as a solid factional camp, at odds with what appeared to be an equally solid 1934 Cannon-Swabeck-Shachtman leadership. But Cannon’s support was less secure than it might have appeared. Before the AWP-CLA merger, Swabeck and Cannon sometimes diverged on their Resident National Committee voting. As we have seen, Swabeck expressed dissatisfaction with lax organizational procedures and he was undoubtedly discontented with Cannon’s personal habits, among the most irritating his tendency to lose too many bouts with the bottle. After the fusion, Cannon often seemed as close to Muste as any other figure on the WP National Committee, which would indicate a certain isolation from his longstanding Trotskyist collaborators. Cannon appreciated that Muste’s political DNA was very different than a communist leader like himself. Muste would never experience the “agonizing separation” from comrades that Cannon had suffered, time and time again, because revolutionary principle came before personal friendships.¹⁰⁵ B.J. Field, apprising things from outside, commented that, “the Cannon

104 Glotzer to Shachtman, 22 October 1934, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers. Glotzer was reporting what Cannon had ostensibly said to Norman Satir, a Chicago CLA member aligned with Shachtman and Glotzer in the factionalism of the dog days.

105 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 171, 230. Cannon marked Muste as flawed in his revolutionary capacities because of his background as a preacher, which a confirmed atheist like Cannon could not countenance: “it is very hard to make anything out of a preacher. ... To take the opium of religion is very bad in itself ... [b]ut to peddle the opium of religion, as preachers do – that is far worse. It is an occupation that deforms the human mind. Not a single preacher, of the many who have come to the radical labor movement of America, throughout its history – not a single one of them turned out good and became a genuine revolutionist in the end.” That said, Cannon was willing to acknowledge that Muste gave promise of becoming a revolutionary, and for a time he was a “real force as a leader in the new party.” Yet there was also in Muste’s personal character something that troubled Cannon deeply, and probably disturbed him especially in the context of 1934–35 where I am suggesting that Cannon was confronted by a factionalism that would not seem to abate, and that forced him to lose valued friendships. Muste, in Cannon’s view, protected personal friends even when he knew they were promoting a destructive and

and Shachtman groups have coalesced for the struggle against us although they may again split apart particularly as we understand Weber and Abern are leading a faction of irreconcilables within the Shachtman faction.”¹⁰⁶

The French turn was to pose a crisis in the WP that involved factionalism, sharp programmatic differentiation, and the alienation of other personal relations for Cannon. Entry into the Socialist Party proved a contentious development that crystallized new and acrimonious alignments and factional differentiations inside the Workers Party, insuring that the long American march to the Fourth International was an arduous one, punctuated by the splitting apart of Trotskyist forces.

6 Anticipating the French Turn

Well before Trotsky proposed the French turn, and more than a year prior to the fusion with the AWP, Cannon and the CLA watched developments in the Socialist Party [SP] intently. The Norman Thomas-led organization was buf-

wrong-headed factionalism. This is something Cannon could not do and it likely grated on him that Muste operated as he did, and seemed to have, if not Trotsky's blessings, at least his indulgences. Even as Muste left the movement Trotsky supposedly advised Cannon not to criticize Muste in ways that would undermine the religious radical's prestige. (See Muste, "My Experience in Labor and Radical Struggles in the Thirties," in Simon, *As We Saw the Thirties*, 146; Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 66; Hentoff, *Peace Agitator*, 90–96. Too much may have been made of such Trotsky instructions, which were conveyed to Swabeck. Trotsky wrote, in mid-August 1935, amid clear factional differences within the Workers Party, that, "I believe that we all have the utmost interest in not prejudicing his [Muste's] authority, which is the common property of the party and of our international movement." See Trotsky to Swabeck, 13 August 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers.) Cannon wrote that Muste "protected his friends against those, who he admitted, were defending a correct political line. ... That is one of the gravest offences against the revolutionary party. What has to be protected in the party, first of all, are the principles of Bolshevism. If one has friends, the best thing he can do for them is teach them the principles of Bolshevism, not to protect them in their error." Cannon's entire history in the revolutionary movement was one of losing close friends whom he could neither successfully teach or bring himself to protect, and it clearly weighed on him. He thought the revolutionary movement devoured its advocates and led, inevitably, to the loss of friendships. See, for instance, Ring interview, 13 February 1974; 8 March 1974.

106 Field to Krehm, 4 March 1934, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers. With the CLA-AWP fusion, the Field group approached the Workers Party, indicating that while it was not in total agreement with this body's statement of principles it proposed entering into discussions around unification of the revolutionary forces. Cannon and Shachtman moved to reject this offer in the Political Committee, their motion carrying. Minutes, Political Committee, 7 January 1935, Folder 2, PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee.

feted about by developments of the mid-1930s. Despite its overtly reformist program, with a leadership undeniably distanced from the revolutionary left, the SP could not help but be affected by mass discontent with the capitalist crisis of the 1930s. As working class militancy increased, and the Stalinist Comintern shifted away from Third Period sectarianism toward popular frontist alliances, advocating “organic unity” among adherents of the Second and Third Internationals, the SP found itself forced to grapple with the new political situation. By the mid-1930s, the Socialist Party was wracked with internal clashes between Right and Left factions, a process fed by new recruits and particularly the growth of its politically volatile youth section, the Young People’s Socialist League [YPSL].

Cannon and many others in the CLA paid close attention to these developments, even as they were busy orchestrating merger with the Musteites. “This inchoate movement in the Socialist Party,” Cannon wrote, in part reflected “the impulse of large numbers of people to find a revolutionary program.” But where this impulse would trend was not yet clear. It might be stifled by the SP’s Old Guard, which was deeply committed to Second International reformism. Alternatively, it could be squandered by a pseudo-left wing of self-proclaimed “Militants,” whom Cannon later characterized as “philistines to the marrow of their bones, without tradition, without serious [Marxist] knowledge.” There also existed within the SP “strong sentiments of conciliation with Stalinists,” whose substantial press, material resources, and sizeable influence within the unions, unemployed organizations, and popular mobilizations held considerable appeal for left Socialists and YPSLs. It was entirely possible that this milieu would be captured by the Communist Party or, alternatively, that some of its components would gravitate to Jay Lovestone’s Right Opposition. None of these options were acceptable to Cannon and his circle within the Communist League of America or, later, the Workers Party. They were aware that an opportunity to influence and recruit those within the Socialist Party who were gravitating to revolutionary politics would not last long. As Cannon later wrote:

We had barely started our work under the independent banner of the Workers Party, but this problem would not wait. We began to insist that more and more attention be paid to the Socialist Party and its developing Left Wing. We argued along the following lines: We must frustrate the Stalinists. We must cut in between the Stalinists and the developing movement of Left Socialism and turn it in the direction of genuine Marxism. And in order to accomplish this we must lay aside all organizational fetishism.

For Cannon, the central question was posed clearly: given the political options available within a volatile Socialist Party – reconciliation with Roosevelt’s illusory Democratic Party New Deal politics; the appeal of the well-heeled apparatus of the Communist Party; or the attractions of Lovestone’s alternative, with its contingent of seemingly sophisticated revolutionary journalists and their propaganda organ, the *Workers Age* – how could the most be gained for the forces of revolution, and how could the least be lost. “Would the potentially revolutionary element of the centrist party – the worker activists and rebellious youth – be engulfed by these forces. Or, would they be fused with the cadres of Trotskyism and be brought over to the road of proletarian revolution.”¹⁰⁷ The attempt to resolve this dilemma with an American version of Trotsky’s French turn, would generate significant opposition to Cannon among former CLA cadres, from longstanding allies such as Hugo Oehler and Tom Stamm, as well as anti-Cannonite factionalists, who included Martin Abern, Albert Glotzer, and Maurice Spector. Complicating matters was that yet-to-be consolidated comrades in the fused Workers Party, most prominently, A.J. Muste, would never warm to the idea of entry into the Socialist Party.

The CLA’s National Committee had discussed leftward developments in the Socialist Party and the Young People’s Socialist League in November 1933. This led to joint collaborative work between the League and the Socialists in Springfield, Illinois, unity expressed in a local SP resolution urging the national body to enter into negotiations that would sever relations with the Second International and secure affiliation with the Fourth International. In Youngstown, Ohio, the CLA branch and the YPSL routinely engaged in common initiatives, and there were “other examples in the country of the same character, though less developed.” Inside the Lovestone Right Opposition, a faction for a new party was headed by Herbert Zam, and this development was of great interest to Cannon. Lovestone himself was reported as having “secret discussions” with groups inside the Socialist Party, and the Right Oppositionist addressed the SP’s National Executive Committee in 1935. Yet as the mid-1930s unfolded, the Lovestone group did little to adroitly position itself to either recruit from the Socialist Party or align with it effectively. *Workers’ Age* noted in October 1934 that, “In France, there is a united front of Socialist and Communist parties such as we have been advocating for years,” but this recognition failed to translate into active interventions. The Right Oppositionists apparently had a great deal of difficulty shedding the kind of sectarianism that inhibited joint work with the

107 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 194–195, 236–237. See also James P. Cannon, “Speech Notes,” “Youth and YPSL,” no date, Reel 34, JPC Papers.

Socialists. The Lovestoneites routinely disparaged the SP and found reasons not to make common cause with social democrats, especially if this meant proximity to Trotskyists, whom they denigrated as a “doctrinaire sect.” Jack Ross claims that Lovestone, in the mid-1930s, could not quite abandon “illusions of ultimately prevailing within the Communist movement, and therefore he would not oblige the Socialist invitation for an ‘all-inclusive party.’” The possibility that the Lovestoneites as well as the Stalinists might well pick up leftward-moving recruits as the Socialist Party faltered nonetheless weighed heavily on Cannon and was inevitably a motivating factor in implementing the French turn.¹⁰⁸

In February – March 1934, the CLA addressed the need for any “new party” to keep “its door open for splits from the Stalinists and the S.P.,” stipulating that “special efforts” were to be made to “penetrate ... the S.P. and the Y.P.S.L. with our literature.” A comrade was assigned to “pay particular attention to development of activities with the S.P. and Y.P.S.L. contacts”; League branches were advised to propose joint activities with the Socialist Party. The League was soon exercising influence in some YPSL branches, shared united front activities with the SP, and engaged in discussions with the Revolutionary Policy Committee, a leftward-moving Lovestone-influenced Socialist faction formed in March 1934. Tucker Smith, a Socialist Party loyalist whose leanings inclined him to potentially revolutionary criticisms of the established Militant group, was the leading light of the RPC, two other influential figures being Irving Brown and J.B. Matthews. Brown was widely regarded as having been planted in the SP by the Right Opposition, while Matthews was an expression of how Communist influence in and concern with the Socialist Party accelerated with the turn to the Popular Front in 1935. Gravitating from Christian socialism and connection to Muste, the Conference for Progressive Political Action, and the Brookwood Labor College in the 1920s, Matthews eventually joined the Socialist Party. By the time of the RPC’s formation in 1934, Matthews was an identifiable Communist Party “fellow traveler.” As a consequence, the RPC was often looked upon by the Socialist Old Guard as a “stalking horse for either the Communists or the followers of Jay Lovestone.” In actuality, the Committee was sufficiently eclectic in

108 Note for instance the general disdain expressed towards the Socialist Party in the Lovestone press and elsewhere, indications of which appear in Paul Le Blanc and Tim Davenport, eds., *The “American Exceptionalism” of Jay Lovestone and His Comrades, 1929–1940: Dissident Marxism in the United States*, Volume 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 229, 233, 276–277, 297, 381, 427, 598; Jack Ross, *The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press/Potomac Books, 2015), 356. For a useful, brief summary of the Lovestoneite critique of a factionalized Socialist Party in the mid-1930s see Robert J. Alexander, *The Right Opposition: The Lovestoneites and the International Communist Opposition of the 1930s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 108–109.

its centrism that it never quite managed to align decisively with any larger discernible political current, but it distinguished itself with its embrace of some of the language of revolutionary communism and commitment to struggle against racism. Even as the RPC generally distrusted Trotsky's critique of Stalinism, some of its members contacted Cannon and the Communist League of America very early in the Committee's history, possibly even before its formal constitution. With an SP Conference scheduled for Detroit on 1 June 1934, Cannon, who had authored two articles in *The Militant* addressing the RPC and its need to clarify positions, especially on international questions, was named as the League's representative to this upcoming gathering.¹⁰⁹

On the eve of this Socialist Party Conference, Shachtman penned a lengthy statement identifying three groups destined to be at loggerheads. First, was the right wing bureaucracy, or Old Guard, a numerical minority that nonetheless controlled the institutional apparatus of mainstream American socialism (the

109 The above two paragraphs draw on Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 23 November 1933; 4 December 1933, Box 35, Folder 9; 9 January 1934, #201; 26 February 1934, #210; 21 March 1934, #212; 3 April 1934, #214; 21 May 1934, #217, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; Francis A. Henson, Revolutionary Policy Committee of the Socialist Party, to Cannon, 1 April 1934, Reel 3, JPC Papers; James P. Cannon, "Left Currents in the S.P.: The Revolutionary Policy Committee," *The Militant*, 5 May 1934; Cannon, "The International Position of the Revolutionary Policy Committee," *The Militant*, 12 May 1934. On the RPC see Alexander, *Right Opposition*, 109–110; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 98, 109–112, 227, which identifies Irving Brown as having been sent into the SP by Lovestone to cultivate a Bolshevik nucleus, claiming this led to the formation of the Committee, which Myers states was headed by former Musteite, J.B. Matthews. On Brown, see, as well, Ted Morgan, *A Covert Life: Jay Lovestone: Communist, Anti-Communist, and Spymaster* (New York: Random House, 1999), esp. 113–114, although there is much on Brown throughout the book. Matthews certainly had a Musteite past, his early social gospel pacifism aligning him with the formative movements Musteite headed in the 1920s. He would, however, join the Socialist Party and then become a Communist Party fellow traveler by 1933, a politics he certainly espoused as he chaired the RCP. By 1938, when he testified before the Dies Committee, Matthews was well on his way to becoming "an especially right-wing professional anti-Communist." Note J.B. Matthews, *Odyssey of a Fellow Traveler* (New York: Mount Vernon, 1938); "J.B. Matthews, Leftist Turned Conservative. Dies. Served Briefly on McCarthy Investigating Panel. Charged Protest Clergy Supported US Communism," *New York Times*, 17 July 1966. See, for a recent brief discussion of the RCP, Tucker Smith, Brown, and Matthews: Ross, *The Socialist Party of America*, 340, with Lovestone addressing the SP's NEC discussed, 355; Zumoff, "The Left in the United States and the Decline of the Socialist Party of America," 173–176. The RCP had a presence in the South, where members were active in the Highlander Folk School, offering strong support for trade unionism, black equality, and campaigns against lynching and white supremacy. See Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 120; Goldfield, *The Southern Key*, 93.

publication *Forward*, the Rand School, trade union sinecures) and was likely to carry “in tow on all decisive questions such honest fools as Norman Thomas and other professional confusionists.” Second, was the “Militant” group, which Shachtman estimated commanded the greatest number of delegates, who were guided by a “typically Centrist program, and not of the best type.” These self-styled Militants juggled Marxist phrases, but in Shachtman’s judgement were committed to “prevent the movement of the Left wing workers in the S.P. towards Communism.” Of most interest was the smallest grouping, the Revolutionary Policy Committee, a centrist current that represented an “honest groping of revolutionary workers towards Communism.” Aware of the Lovestone ideological freight carried by this contingent, Shachtman was convinced that the RPC was “an active, fermenting group” that, “fraternally assisted by us, can throw off most if not all” of the Right Opposition baggage “without too much difficulty.” Shachtman worried that the RPC planned to bloc with the Militants. It was thus in danger of being stampeded into concessions in the name of “the party unity” that the Old Guard would demand and that the Militants would accept. Shachtman pressed Cannon to strive for the crystallization “of **an absolutely independent Communist group.**” This meant Cannon exercising his influence with the RPC in ways that encouraged political separation, especially from the Militants.¹¹⁰

Cannon’s eventual report indicated that the RPC presence at the Detroit Conference was weak and ineffectual. It fragmented as the Militants acquiesced to the Old Guard. This political reading notwithstanding, the SP adopted a controversial Declaration of Principles in Detroit that many conservative veterans of the Party regarded as an incendiary document, pushing social democracy in the direction of communism.¹¹¹ It galvanized the Old Guard to mobilize against the left wing, and hardened animosities within the SP. Daniel Bell claimed that the Detroit declaration “unloosed a civil war in the Socialist Party,” and that “for a year and a half guerrilla warfare raged in the party.” Having won some RPC adherents to his positions, Cannon saw potential in a reconstituted National RPC, composed of the best and most leftward-moving elements, some of whom had established contacts with the League in Chicago

110 Shachtman, “The Socialist Party Convention,” Communist League of American, Minutes, National Committee, 29 May 1934, #218, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers. The approach to the SP in the League press included: Albert Glotzer, “Before the Socialist Party Convention,” *The Militant*, 12 May 1934; Glotzer, “Before the Detroit Convention of the Socialist Party,” *The Militant*, 19 May 1934; Albert Goldman, “The Left Face of the Socialist Party,” 26 May 1934.

111 Ross, *The Socialist Party of America*, 347–349.

and elsewhere. Such people, Cannon reported, were prepared to “take up an aggressive fight” and there was now the basis for “a national fraction.” Cannon also provided a more detailed account of the influence of the Right Opposition Lovestoneites in the RPC, suggesting less control over the dissident bloc than he and others had originally surmised. The singular Lovestone “plant” in the RPC, Irving Brown, was somewhat isolated, and Cannon judged that the Right Opposition seemed to be angling for a quick split in order to secure what it could for itself on a short-term basis. The Communist Party, Cannon was convinced, had no influence in the RPC, and was withdrawing “what little they had in the S.P.” The American Workers Party played no role at the Detroit meeting, and its American Approach attracted inconsequential support among the SP’s left wing. The League, Cannon concluded, was now in a position to “build the RPC everywhere and gage the opportune moment for the putting forward of our full position, for the new party, etc. This, however, to depend upon developments in the S.P.”¹¹²

The CLA promptly assigned Cannon the task of coordinating the work of a national fraction in the SP, with 24-year old Joseph Carter to assist him in the work with the YPSL; critiques were to be posed of the RPC approach to trade unions, the proletarian struggle for power, and international issues; and a campaign launched pushing the left-wing of the SP to advocate a break from the Second International and the creation of a new, Fourth, International. Debates, particularly involving the League, its youth section, the Spartacus Youth Clubs, and the YPSL were undertaken. Party assignments and exchanges of views aside, however, Cannon, Shachtman, Oehler and others could do little but watch events unfold inside the Socialist Party, embroiled as they were in the Minneapolis struggles during the summer of 1934. With the Old Guard routing the Militant faction in a New York Socialist Party convention, left advances

112 “The Socialist Party Convention: Report by Cannon,” Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 25 June 1934, #221, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers. See also Bell, “The Background and Development of Marxian Socialism in the United States,” 379–380; James P. Cannon, “Socialist Party Adopts ‘Militant’ Position at Detroit National Convention,” *The Militant*, 9 June 1934; Cannon, “The Socialist Party Convention,” June 1934 and “Report and Motions on SP Development,” 25 June 1934, in Stanton and Taber, eds., *The Communist League of America, 1932–1934: James P. Cannon, Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 341–352; “After the Socialist Party Convention,” *The Militant*, 16 June 1934; “Factions Struggle for Control of the Socialist Party,” *The Militant*, 23 June 1934. Cannon offered a public forum on the Socialist Party Convention, speaking at Irving Plaza on 21 June 1934. See *The Militant*, 16 June 1934. See also Lovestone’s jaundiced report on the Detroit Convention, in which he castigated the Militant group’s “confusion” and the RCP’s failure “to measure up to the situation.” *Workers Age*, 15 June 1934.

registered in Detroit seemed precarious. Discussion in broad left circles turned on the question of a CP-SP United Front that, as Trotskyists knew well, would be premised on Stalinist demands to exclude them. Little had apparently come of the League's orientation to the SP by September 1934. Shachtman complained that, "We have good preliminary contacts [in the Socialist Party]. They are not being used. Our neglect in this field is extraordinary and we may have to pay heavily for it, as they are doing now in our French section. A first task is really to set our fraction in motion, on a national, organized centralized scale ..."¹¹³ This was largely how things would remain on the SP front for some time, with the CLA-AWP fusion consuming Cannon's and the League's energies, debates over the issues raised by Trotsky's French turn complicating matters further.

7 Americanizing the French Turn: Factions and Combinations

In the Resident National Committee's discussions on fusion with the AWP, Hugo Oehler was part of the broad favorable consensus, but there was always something of a jaundiced bite in his support. This manifested itself in the demand that the CLA define precisely what it was doing in engagement with the Musteites. Oehler had a tendency to lapse into mechanical refusals, in which his opposition to centrism nurtured sectarianism and ultra-left isolation. In February 1934, for instance, Oehler secured unanimous agreement to a motion premised on thwarting Musteite gravitations to centrism. He was adamant in blocking the formation of any new party that did not have at its programmatic core the Left Opposition's unmistakable communist orientation. Further, Oehler insisted that if the League failed to convince the AWP to embrace its program, merger was out of the question. By May of 1934 fusion with the AWP, orientation to the SP, and alignment with other groups had, in Oehler's view, congealed. "I agree with the policy on the s.p. convention," wrote the NC member, "but think the deficiencies in our program lie in the failure

113 "Old Guard Routs Militants in the New York SP Convention," *The Militant*, 7 July 1934; "The Socialist Party in 1914 and Today," *The Militant*, 11 August 1934; Joseph Carter, "The Crisis in the Socialist Party: The Coming Referendum," *The Militant*, 11 August 1934; "Chicago Debate," *The Militant*, 23 June 1934; Arne Swabeck, "An Open Letter to the CP and the SP on the United Front," *The Militant*, 25 August 1934; "Young Socialists Give Young Stalinists an ABC Lesson on the United Front," and "A Reformed 2nd or a 4th International," *The Militant*, 6 October 1934. See also, Albert Glotzer, "Positions of Conflicting Groups in the Socialist Party," *The Militant*, 2 June 1934. Shachtman's comments in "Memorandum: CLA, AWP, The New Party, and the SP," Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 12 September 1934, #224, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers.

of the committee to base the negotiations with the Gitlow group, the A.W.P., and now the R.P.C., upon a thesis which defines our position on the question of organizing the new party in America and starting an internal discussion on the thesis." With the AWP fusion proceeding in October 1934, and Cannon in Europe, Oehler clashed more directly with Shachtman, while Swabeck and Abern oscillated between demands for a strengthening of the League's position in the merger and acquiescence to the agreements reached between the two organizations in a draft statement prepared by Muste and Shachtman. Oehler thought this document "entirely inadequate," "below a minimum Marxian program," and the thin edge of what would become a wider wedge of inevitable future "compromise." He subsequently submitted a list of thirteen amendments to the Muste-Shachtman statement, roughly half of which were accepted by the Resident NC. Others, including proposals on "the conquest of power," "the consolidation of workers' rule," and "imperialism and war," were rejected. Upon his return from France, Cannon managed to renegotiate the draft with Muste in ways that placated the Oehlerites, but he now realized that they represented a factional barrier to the growth of the revolutionary left in the United States. "Don't mean to question Oehlerites loyalty or to exclude or expel them," Cannon wrote in notes for a speech, "but interests of our movement, the Int., and of the New Party demand their political defeat." When Cannon successfully moved a resolution on the issues addressed at the ICL's Plenum, Oehler was the sole dissenting Resident NC vote. He called for an international conference to discuss a variety of issues related to the building of the Fourth International and, if this gathering could not be convened, promoted the idea of a League referendum on the Plenum's decisions on "organic unity as well as other pressing problems confronting us." It was more than apparent that Oehler and his followers wanted nothing to do with entry into the Socialist Party.¹¹⁴

By the end of the year, Cannon had identified a specific Oehler Group within the Communist League of America, and pressed to ascertain its relationship to a recently arrived European, Paul Eiffel [Paul Kirchoff]. Eiffel, who was ostensibly (according to Weber) bent on button-holing comrades, poisoning their minds, and instilling in them a sense that it was necessary to build a Fifth International, was affiliated with the Internationalist Communists of Germany [IKD] and aligned with one of the leading opponents of the ICL's new entryist

114 Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 7 February 1934, #207; 29 May 1934, #218; 22 October 1934, #232; 29 October 1934, #233; 8 November 1934, #234, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; Cannon, "Speech Notes," "Where Does Oehler's Position Lead?" Box 28, Folder 4, JPC Papers, quoted in the Prometheus Research Library reprinting of Max Shachtman, *Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?* 11.

orientation, Erwin Ackerknecht [Erwin/Eugene Bauer]. At the core of Eiffel's discontent was a condemnation of the French turn as capitulationist/liquidationist: "I regard the step taken in France and the arguments given for it as a tendency to depart on an international scale from Marxism in the question of the revolutionary vanguard party ... a tendency which if not checked and defeated in time must lead to fatal consequences for the ICL and its efforts to build the 4th International." Eiffel considered that a struggle against "the so-called French orientation" was "at the same time" a struggle to reinstate the Pierre Lhuillier Group, which had originally opposed the French turn, refusing to enter the SFIO, leading to its expulsion from the ICL. He conceded that, "Inasmuch as the Lhuillier Group is outside the ICL collaboration with it over the head of the ICL is, of course, impermissible," such an act being a violation of communist democratic centralism. Weber wrote to Glotzer that Eiffel was "a worthless element as far as I can see. He stems originally from an anti-parliamentarian background and still remains, like Oehler, an ultra-leftist." This Oehlerite ultra-leftism was on display in the pages of the *New Militant* early in 1935, the dissident NC member writing two articles against the idea of revolutionaries building a labor party. Oehler also took direct aim at Trotsky, arguing that the Old Man's comments distancing himself from "organic unity" were too little too late. Only an outright repudiation of the notion of entering the French Socialist Party would present an adequate revolutionary stand. The stage was thus set, as Cannon and the Left Opposition fused with the Musteite AWP, for a factional confrontation over the French turn and its Americanization.¹¹⁵

115 Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 29 October 1934, #233; 8 November 1934, #234; 19 November 1934, #235, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; Shachtman, "Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?" 12–17; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 185. Eiffel sought out Glotzer in Chicago, with Weber advising Glotzer to, "Give him every opportunity to spill out his heart, and then hit him with a club. That is all he deserves." Weber to Glotzer, 26 October 1934, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers. On Oehler's opposition to the labor party see Hugo Oehler, "Should Revolutionaries Build a Labor Party?" *New Militant*, 9 February 1935; 16 February 1935. Albert Goldman, then working inside the SP, would offer something of a rejoinder in Goldman, "Should Socialists Favor a Labor Party?" *Socialist Appeal*, May 1935. It was alleged that Eiffel was communicating, in April 1935, with ICL sections in Cuba, Chile, and Paris, in ways that could harm the Workers Party. See Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 27 May 1935, with attachment, Oscar Fischer, Secretariat IKD, to Cannon, 4 April 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers; and Oehler "A Reply to the Crux Letter," 18 February 1935, Roll 3, Reel 3346, MS Papers. On Oehler, Bauer, and Eiffel [or E.] see Clarke to Cochran, no date [1935], Unnamed File, Box 1, Bert Cochran Papers, Tamiment Institute, Bobst Library, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter Cochran Papers].

Also contentious was the case of Albert Goldman, a Chicago lawyer who made his way out of the Communist Party and into the Left Opposition.¹¹⁶ Cannon and Goldman had a long history, reaching back to 1920 and their common work in the early American communist movement. Goldman was won to Left Opposition politics in 1933 as a result of Stalinism's failures in opposing Hitler. He and Cannon worked together during the Minneapolis teamsters' strikes, where Goldman functioned as the League's *de facto* attorney and offered advice on the conflict and its strategic direction. He found nothing in the AWP to attract him, when the much larger mass base of the differentiated Socialist Party beckoned. With Cannon and Shachtman in favor of establishing a group within the Socialist Party, and working toward a clarification of principled relations with the RPC, Goldman was well aware of Trotsky promoting the French turn. As the Resident National Committee considered "the Spartacus Youth Clubs entering as a fraction into the Young [People's] Socialist League," a proposal ultimately rejected, with Cannon, Glotzer, Spector, Skoglund, Dunne, Abern, and Oehler in opposition, Goldman embraced the entryist orientation as he interpreted it for the United States.

Goldman eventually took it upon himself to wage a one-man campaign for entry and, according to Glotzer, "He passed his statement out to non-league members and to opponents of our organization in spite of the motion we passed forbidding him to do it. ... He changed his position from week to week. First, the long period of reformism would impel us to enter the s.p. and thus be with the masses. Then the lightning-like events does not permit us much time and we must enter the s.p. at once or be lost." Making this leap at the very time Cannon was desperate to orchestrate a merger movement with the Musteites, Goldman did not develop his point of view "because he heard rumors about difficulties with the AWP," but rather because he was convinced "the fusion will bring nothing of a positive nature. ... it is meaningless!" Obviously in violation of League discipline, Goldman apparently threatened, in October 1934, that if fusion with the AWP was to proceed, he would "go directly into the s.p." Goldman was confident that, in six months' time, the new party "would be compelled to adopt his position." That would largely prove correct, although at the time neither Cannon nor others in the CLA leadership knew this would be the case. In Chicago, Glotzer and others dressed the revolutionary lawyer down, giving him "a real political trimming" and letting the National Committee know

116 As an introduction to Albert Goldman see Joe Allen, "Defender of the Movement," <https://socialistworker.org/2011/01/20defender-of-the-movement>, accessed 16 January 2017; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 114–115, 155, 163, 244.

of his transgressions. That body expelled Goldman at a 29 October 1934 meeting, citing Goldman's intransigent opposition to the League's orientation to building the new party, his flagrant breaches of discipline, which included carrying on an internal discussion with outside organizations and individuals, and his consequent "desertion from the League and ... capitulation to the SP." Goldman thus entered the Socialist Party as an individual "revolutionary socialist."

Cannon suggested in the pages of *The Militant* that his once-close comrade and collaborator was little better than a "strikebreaker." However much Goldman claimed to remain an ally of the revolutionary Trotskyist movement, Cannon insisted, "We have no need of such friends. The new party needs revolutionary militants who are firm in their convictions and loyal to their own organization." He saw little that could be gained from Goldman's illusions of "a new political recipe," premised as it was on "personal diplomacy, back-slapping the centrist leaders [of the SP], and the devil knows what other clever tricks." Oehler tried to up the political ante, moving in the Resident National Committee that, "The position of Comrade Goldman involves a fundamental Marxian organizational question and presents a position which leads to a desertion of the League and a capitulation to Social Democracy. Comrade Goldman's false position flows logically from the mistake of the so-called French Question, i.e., organic unity and the dissolving of the League into the SFIO." But this unambiguous hostility to the French turn found no takers, with only Oehler voting for the motion. Goldman was soon set up inside the SP, where he aligned with YPSL leader Ernest Erber to establish a mimeographed bulletin, the *Socialist Appeal*, an official publication of the Socialist Party of Illinois that would soon morph into a monthly organ receptive to the ideas of the Workers Party.¹¹⁷

117 The above paragraphs draw on Glotzer to Shachtman, 22 October 1934; Weber to Glotzer, 26 October 1934, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers; Communist League of America, National Committee, Minutes, 3 April 1934, #214; 25 June 1934, #221; 26 August 1934, #223; 12 September 1934, #224; 21 September 1934, #225; 29 October 1934, #233, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 112–115; James P. Cannon, "For a New Revolutionary Party," from *The Militant*, 17 November 1934, reprinted in Stanton and Taber, eds., *The Communist League of America, 1932–1934: James P. Cannon, Writings and Speeches, 1932–1934*, 367–373; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 244; "League Expels Goldman for Capitulation to SP," *The Militant*, 3 November 1934; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 261–262. As Glotzer's critical letter to Shachtman, cited above, suggests, Shachtman was the most adamant figure on the Resident NC advocating the entry of the Spartacus Youth into the YPSL, and in a document appended to the 12 September 1934 meeting urged, "The National Committee must immediately ... call a joint meeting with the National Youth Committee (and later with the New York Spartacus Youth Club membership) to discuss the question of the advisability of the New York Bolshevik-Leninist youth joining, in bloc, the Young People's Socialist League. ... no serious objective arguments can be presented against the idea ...

Goldman's impetuous decision to leave the League on the eve of the AWP fusion and join the Socialist Party irked Cannon. He valued greatly Goldman's selfless contribution to the revolutionary movement, and his important role in the Minneapolis strikes. He appreciated Goldman's talents, especially his capacities as a public speaker for the movement and his legal expertise in defense of class war militants facing convictions in courts and subsequent jail terms. But Cannon had come to see that Goldman had a "strong sense of personal superiority": he resented the Chicago attorney leaping "the tracks" and "joining the SP." As Cannon later told Harry Ring, "I don't recall him even consulting with us about it. He just made the jump." Obviously disappointed in Goldman at this point in 1934, Cannon later reflected that, "He was a unique case He didn't do what was logical, but what he was impelled to do at the moment, for one reason or another. ... [H]e got one of his inspirations," and then he was gone. "[D]eeply resent[ing] his action in breaking ranks," Cannon was also able to turn to Goldman as early as January 1935, inviting the revolutionary lawyer to act on behalf of the California Musteite Workers Party member, Norman Mini, a political request the now Socialist Party member accepted and conducted scrupulously.¹¹⁸ The French turn was taking its toll on Cannon, in 1934, even if its Americanization had not yet been fully implemented.

every day lost in settling this question is a blow at the progress of the new party movement" Cannon noted that: "We were watching the SP very attentively, especially the Young People's Socialist League," See Ring interview, 8 March 1974, 9. An early hint of Goldman's position appeared in Albert Goldman, "The Left Face of the Socialist Party," *The Militant*, 26 May 1934, while his full-statement of entry, including a repudiation of Cannon's criticisms, appears in Goldman, "From Communism to Socialism," A lecture delivered before the Sixth Congressional Branch Forum of the Socialist Party of Cook County, 7 December 1934. Goldman utilized the *Socialist Appeal* to both criticize the RPC for any concessions to the SP's right wing and defend its right to exist and develop as a left-wing group. See Goldman, "Two Resolutions," *Socialist Appeal*, 1 (February 1935), 15–18.

- 118 Ring interview, 23 February 1974, 11; 1 March 1974, 3–4; 29 March 1974, 9–10; 5 April 1974, 11–14, 20–21. The first mention of Goldman and the Sacramento labor defense case is "Warnick is Released on \$3,200 Bail," *New Militant*, 12 January 1935. The issue of Goldman being brought on board the NPLD-supported Sacramento case of Norman Mini was complicated by the somewhat mercurial actions of Herbert Solow, who was tasked by the Workers Party's Political Committee with conferring with Goldman and establishing that the Chicago attorney was willing to act under specific conditions. Solow failed to report back to the PC, "insisted immediate action must be taken, accused Secretariat of dilly-dallying, etc., informed Mini and other defendants ... that Goldman was available and before having authorization ... engaged Goldman." For this Solow was censured. See Workers Party, [Political Committee?], Minutes, 7 January 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers, which also contains an extended statement, "Resolution of the Secretariat of the Political Committee, on the Policy in the Sacramento Case," which spells out some of the

Muste later claimed that Cannon assured him that the American Trotskyists had no intention of entering the Socialist Party. Yet it was understood that drawing militants and dissident groups like the RPC toward the Workers Party was very much on the agenda of the new party, which was also apprised of the ongoing collaborative work that linked the Young Spartacus Clubs and the Young People's Socialist Alliance. There was explicit knowledge of WP branches being established in the Illinois coal fields, where it was thought preparations could be made "for a break of sympathetic elements from the S.P." All of this and more was addressed in December 1934 meetings involving Cannon, Muste, and all of the leading cadre of the fused CLA-AWP. Sidney Hook denies categorically that, "as a condition of merger," Muste "exact[ed] a promise" that the French turn would not be emulated in the United States. "There was no such promise!" exclaims Hook, adding that, "As the chief figure representing the American Workers Party in its negotiations, I can affirm that the subject never came up. Nor did it arise in the extended and heated debates among the AWP membership whether to approve the merger." Cannon simply recalled that, "We didn't see the Socialist Party as a field as it was in France at that time. ... Muste was very hostile to the idea of entry into the SP. But we had never proposed that. They suspected it of us. But we had not proposed that, and didn't until 1936. We were awaiting developments." As late as August 1935, Trotsky himself confirmed that no tendency within the Workers Party was advocating a reproduction of the French orientation in the United States: "I do not at all mean ... that the American comrades must attempt a simple reproduction of the French ... experience. ... The fusion of two independent organizations has opened up

difficulties demanding attention in this defense initiative. For a brief account sympathetic to Solow, see Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 104–107, which explains Solow's behavior in the NPLD Mini case as "a streak of individualism ... scarcely compatible with the party discipline the Trotskyists aspired to establish" (106). Wald also touches on Solow's inability to address large crowds, and how Cannon and others had to deal with this problem as Solow proved incapacitated in certain situations. Solow clearly had a plethora of psychological issues, many of which are touched on critically in Diana Trilling, *The Beginning of the Journey: The Marriage of Diana and Lionel Trilling* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), 260, which comments on Solow's depression, anger, and problems of taking out his resentments and unhappiness on Jewish women around him. See also the thinly-disguised portrait of Solow in his first wife's novel: Tess Slesinger, *The Unpossessed* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1934), commented on by both Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 39 and Trilling, *Beginning of the Journey*, 137, although there appears to be a difference of opinion as to whether Solow and his friend Eliot Cohen are depicted as Miles Flinder and Bruno Leonard or vice versa.

great possibilities for you. ... As part of your task as an independent organization, it is a question of knowing how to influence, directly and systematically, the development of the left wing in the Socialist Party."¹¹⁹

8 The Intensification of Oehlerite Sectarianism

Just how such influence could be exercised depended on the configuration of forces within the Socialist Party, the assessment of which would determine whether or not an explicit policy of entryism was dictated. Cannon and Shachtman, to be sure, were considering entry as early as January 1935, although such discussions as did take place were never more than a preliminary "feeling out" of the possibilities. There was no hiding the fact that at the time of the CLA-AWP merger, the SP was very much on the political radar screen of the old League leadership.¹²⁰

In April – May 1935, Cannon became aware that Socialist Party leader and Militant Group figurehead, Norman Thomas, was despairing that "practically everywhere the Party is losing, not gaining morale." Thomas blamed the demor-

¹¹⁹ Muste and his surrogate, Nat Hentoff, present Cannon as having duped Muste, when the situation was clearly far more complicated, with the explicit direction the French turn in America would take with respect to the relationship of the Workers Party more open-ended in December 1934 than Muste allowed. See, for Muste's subsequent claims: Hentoff, *Peace Agitator*, 91–93; Hentoff, ed., *Essays of A.J. Muste*, 163–164; Muste, "My Experience in Labor and Radical Struggles," in Simon, ed., *As We Saw the Thirties*, 140–142. Hook, *Out of Step*, 200 presents a different view, as does Cannon in Ring interview, 8 March 1974, 8–9. For evidence of discussion of the SP at the beginning of the formation of the WP, see Workers Party of the US, National Committee, Minutes, 5 December 1934, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers. Note as well "Statement of the National Committee at Pittsburgh, Developments in the Socialist Party," 16 March 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers. Trotsky's position in Leon Trotsky, "A Cancer in the Workers Party," 12 August 1935, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1935–1936]*, 71. It is instructive that as much as Muste was revered in many circles, he repulsed others, such as Manny Geltman and Harry Roskolenko, whom Constance Myers interviewed. Both were unambiguous in their insistence that Muste lacked integrity. Roskolenko was adamant that Muste was "an exercise in theological vanity," while Geltman claimed Muste gave him "butterflies in my guts," and recalled, "I distrusted him entirely." See Myers, *The Prophet's Army*, 233–234.

¹²⁰ For suggestions of this see, for instance, E. Everett (Los Angeles) to Comrades Cannon & Shachtman, 10 January 1935; Larry Turner to Cannon, 19 February 1935; Gerry Allard and Joe Angelo to Cannon, 26 February 1935, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Ring interview, 8 March 1974, 8–9; "SP Militants Forced to Cover SP Right Wing Labor Defense Maneuver," *New Militant*, 9 March 1935; "The Socialist Party in Crisis," *New Militant*, 30 March 1935.

alization of the SP on the “extreme right wing,” ensconced in New York, which battled the Militants and the much smaller RPC left wing to a standstill, repudiating positions arrived at in the Detroit June 1934 SP convention. Thomas suggested to his allies, privately and confidentially, that many leftists in the mainstream social democratic organization were convinced the SP was headed for an inevitable factional split, was little more than an “adjunct to Roosevelt,” and that further work in the Party was “futile.” Buoyed by the possibilities this presented for the Workers Party, Cannon, Shachtman, Swaback, and the African American Musteite intellectual, Ernest Rice McKinney, met with a contingent of RPCers, including Francis Henson. There was some evidence of movement on the part of SP dissidents toward revolutionary positions. At this point, the orientation to the SP turned less on entryism and more in the direction of recruitment. Cannon and others also advised allies inside Thomas’s Party on how best to develop their responses to an escalating process of political differentiation. The situation was fluid enough that Cannon, Shachtman and their pro-French turn comrades in the WP leadership were clearly in favor of keeping their options open.¹²¹

This approach contributed to carping in some quarters. It was alleged since the fusion proceedings of 1934, largely on the basis of inner-party gossip, that Cannon was in favor of reforming or regenerating the Second International. Weber, for instance, later complained to the International Secretariat that, “Comrade Cannon states ... that nobody has proposed entry into the SP That is quite correct. But on this question of the relation or orientation of the WP to the SP the Cannonites have from the beginning maintained an ambiguous attitude that has tended to make uncertain the course of the Party.”¹²²

121 Francis Henson to Cannon, 8 May 1935; Henson to Cannon, 21 May 1935, enclosing Norman Thomas to Comrades, 9 February 1935; Cannon to Muste, 22 May 1935, Reel 20, JPC Papers; “Old Guard Pounds Militants as Socialist Party NC Meets,” *New Militant*, 13 July 1935. Something of Thomas’s position can be gleaned from Norman Thomas, “The Thirties in America as a Socialist Recalls Them,” in Simon, *As We Saw the Thirties*, 110–113; Norman Thomas, *The Choice Before Us: Mankind at the Crossroads* (New York: AMS Press, 1970; original 1934); W.A. Swanberg, *Norman Thomas: The Last Idealist* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1976), 147–199; Fleishman, *Norman Thomas*, 163–181; Seidler, *Norman Thomas*, 125–170. On Henson, with whom McKinney would maintain a relationship, see Alexander, *The Right Opposition*, 109–110.

122 Glotzer to Shachtman, 22 October 1934; Weber to Glotzer, 26 October 1934, Roll 11, Reel 3354; Weber to International Secretariat, 29 December 1935, Roll 6, Reel 3349, MS Papers.

As a coherent faction against the French turn cohered around Oehler, Tom Stamm and veteran Hungarian Trotskyist, Louis Basky, this trio embarked on a crusade to "Bolshevize" the New York Musteite wing of the Workers Party. With Cannon and Muste on tour, rumblings "of trouble with the sectarian phrasemongers back in New York" began to reach Cannon, who heard of the hounding of "all who might be deviating from the straight and narrow path of doctrine." Bolshevization coincided with increasingly vehement attacks on Trotsky's tactics in France. Any suggestion that the Workers Party entertain thoughts of entering the Socialist Party as the French Ligue moved into the SFIO was denounced by Oehler and Stamm as the equivalent of uniting with the "stinking corpse" of the Second International, a decaying "reformist, traitor organization," with which no steeled revolutionary could associate without a fundamental "betrayal of principle." Cannon and Shachtman called for "No discussion for six months!" in an attempt to give the new party a chance to cohere and engage in constructive political work.

The Oehlerites, however, precipitated the issue of the French turn "into the ranks in the most poisonous fashion" and, according to Weber, "proceeded to miseducate and win over the new and inexperienced members of the Party," building up an "entirely unwarranted strength." Trotsky himself came in for an Oehlerite bashing, the claim being made that the ICL leader flip-flopped in his position on "organic unity," at first embracing the term and only later rightly repudiating it. More importantly, the entire entryist orientation, according to this critique, must be repudiated. By mid-February 1935, Oehler was calling for recognition that, "The so-called French turn has had its damaging effects upon our International movement and clearly shows that all of the basic reasons given were false." Entry into the SFIO proved "a retarding influence on workers of the two working class parties." Oehler insisted that "ORGANIZATIONAL INDEPENDENCE" outside of the Second and Third Internationals was the only means of building a "new party based upon revolutionary Marxism." In contrast, the French turn was destined to produce further disintegration of the revolutionary forces, isolating them from splits from the Communist International and new groups that were forming out of these fissures, tailing after Social Democracy and, indeed, shoring up its centrist organizations. To "stem the tide of disintegration," it was necessary for the ICL to repudiate "the International turn, the so-called French turn." By 1 April 1935, the WP Political Committee was forced to address Oehler's public declarations that he was being assigned to party work in Illinois in order to "prevent his participation in party discussions in New York," an allegation Cannon and the majority in the Workers Party leadership condemned. If Cannon could count on the support of a majority of the New York membership to oppose Oehler, it was not the case that this

hegemony was entirely secure: a battle over competing resolutions resulting in 89 votes for the Cannon majority, 55 votes for the Oehler minority, with a significant contingent of 34 votes abstaining.¹²³

The Oehlerite campaign was given added impetus as Joseph Zack [Joseph Kornfeder] joined the Workers Party in December 1934. A refugee from the Communist Party, Zack had a long history as a trade union organizer in the William Z. Foster wing of the Stalinist movement. He left the CP in mid-1934, protesting the Comintern's shift toward the Popular Front and its abandonment of the policy of building independent, revolutionary unions outside of the American Federation of Labor. A graduate of the Lenin School, educated in the fundamentals of anti-Trotskyist Comintern ideology, and a particularly strident opponent of working within AFL unions, Zack was an experienced Communist functionary. A former confidante of Joseph Stalin, Zack was a seasoned Third Period ultra-leftist with deep roots in both labor and African American work, commanding support in districts of New York City like Brooklyn and the Bronx.

Zack was thus a uniquely informed and potentially influential recruit to the new party movement. He was almost immediately put on the Workers Party's modest payroll, "employed full time for the present as a special trade union organizer." Consulted by Muste and others on fraction work in the Communist Party, Zack also authored articles in the *New Militant* addressing the Comintern and its policies. It was proposed in January 1935 that Zack tour industrial districts where Workers Party branches were keen to discuss relations of the new party and the Stalinists.

There were early signs, however, that Zack was not content to restrict his activity to such endeavors. Burnham secured unanimous support for a motion in late January 1935 disassociating the Political Committee from a statement Zack made with respect to the New York City Food Workers Industrial Union. After an initial period of settling in to the Workers Party, Zack unleashed a barrage of disruption. He teamed up with Oehler in opposition to the French turn, and turned the Workers Party upside down with anti-Cannon missives, reaching from New York branch meetings to Minneapolis. In New York, Zack free-lanced positions at public meetings, contradicting the Workers Party's already

123 The above two paragraphs draw on Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 185, 199–200; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 98–99; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 247–250; Ring interview, 8 March 1974, 8; Shachtman, "Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?" 12–26; Hugo Oehler, "A Reply to the Crux Letter," 15 February 1935, Roll 3, Reel 3346, MS Papers; Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 1 April 1935, attachment, Oehler, Stamm, Basky, "Resolution Presented to the New York Membership Meeting," 31 March 1935; 8 April 1935, Roll 12, Reel 335, MS Papers.

established policies, labelling the French turn “a plot to capitulate to the Socialist Party.” He distributed a four-page manifesto calling for the creation of a new labor organization, in which “Joseph Zack, prominent advocate of independent unionism, will be the chief collaborator”; and he attended Cannon’s public lectures on WP trade union policy at Irving Plaza to offer his unambiguous dissent. At a March 1935 Active Workers Conference in Pittsburgh, the Oehler Group sided up to the former advocate of Third Period revolutionary unions with a reconsideration of the Workers Party’s trade union policies, opening the door to Zack’s position on independent labor organizations. In April 1935, Zack corresponded with Vincent Ray Dunne, expressing the view that “Cannon’s strategy” of working within AFL unions (it was also Muste’s orientation), maintaining the fight for affiliation with the Tobin-led International Brotherhood of Teamsters, was “20 years out of date,” breeding a “defensive morale” that was “good for suicide.” Standing against the instructions of the Workers Party’s National Committee, Zack lectured Dunne, “If you are weak then take Cannon’s policy. It provides for a respectable retreat with Tobin coming out on top – the union gradually becoming a racket, etc. If you are strong enough for a real fight or have a chance to become so – then better to take my advice.” It was all a bit much. Zack was expelled, but not before a great deal of damage had been done among the not yet consolidated WP membership.¹²⁴

124 On Zack see Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 201–202; Myers, *Prophet’s Army*, 98–99; Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, “Motion on Zack,” 22 December 1934, Box 35, Folder 10, GB Papers; Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, “Report by Subcommittee on Fraction Work,” 7 January 1935; “Recommendation on C.P. Fraction Work,” 10 January 1935; 21 January 1935, Roll 12, Reel 335, MS Papers; “Joseph Zack, CP Leader, Joins Workers Party,” *New Militant*, 22 December 1934; Zack, “A Farewell to Bureaucracy,” *New Militant*, 5 January 1935; Zack, “Cult of Leadership, Zig-Zags, and Turns Mark CI Policy,” *New Militant*, 12 January 1935; “Akron Party Members Follow Zack to W.P.,” *New Militant*, 26 January 1935; Max Shachtman, “The Case of Joseph Zack,” *Socialist Appeal*, 23 July 1938; “Joseph Zack Kornfeder is Dead,” *New York Times*, 4 May 1963; Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: Viking, 1960), esp. 293–294; Benjamin Gitlow, *The Whole of Their Lives: Communism in America – A Personal History and Intimate Portrayal of Its Leaders* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 104–104, 156, 246. On the Lenin School and its role as a training ground for Stalinists see John McIlroy, Alan Campbell, Barry McLaughlin, and John Halstead, “Forging the Faithful: The British at the International Lenin School,” *Labour History Review*, 68 (April 2003), 99–128. Zack’s breaches of discipline in 1935 are addressed in some of the material cited above, but see, especially, Joseph Zack to Vincent Ray Dunne, 29 April 1935; “Speech by Comrade Zack,” 12 May 1935; “Excerpt from Cannon’s Speech, Sunday Evening,” 12 May 1935; Workers Party, National Committee, Pittsburgh Plenary Session, Minutes, 15 March 1935, with attachment, “Trade Union Proposals”; Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 20 May 1935, attachment, Basky, Oehler, Stamm, “To the members of the NC, to the branches, to the members of

Some regarded the expulsion of Zack as proof that Cannon controlled a bureaucratic apparatus within the newly-formed WP, even though the former Stalinist's breaches of Party discipline had been egregious.¹²⁵ Oehler, Stamm, and Basky condemned Zack's violations and disassociated themselves from his actions and positions. But they insisted that Zack had been "driven" to his transgressions by "the Cannon regime," which utilized its authority in the Workers Party's Political Committee in ways that disavowed "party procedure and the Constitution." On assignment in the Illinois coalfields, Oehler rallied miner militants Gerry Allard and Joseph Angelo. The trio sent a telegram to the New York Political Committee of the Workers Party protesting the disciplining of Zack and arguing that "difference on tactical questions" did not warrant expulsion. Oehler chimed in with his personal opinion that the scapegoating of Zack was a cover for the Political Committee's blunders, and he considered it "an open attack on left forces." A minor revolt in the Bronx Workers Party branch, resisting the disciplinary ouster of Zack, flared over the early summer of 1935. Asserting that Zack's expulsion was part of Cannon's orchestrated assault on the WP's left-wing, which included not only driving revolutionaries from the party but the coddling of centrists and right-wingers, the Oehler Group called for an end to organizational resolution of what they claimed were fundamental political questions. It demanded a full airing before the membership.

This claim of Zack's "hard and mechanical handling" by the Political Committee gained credence among some uninitiated Workers Party members. Stamm exploited the fact that the public proclamation of non-Marxian views by former AWPers such as Louis Budenz, V.F. Calverton, and Ludwig Lore had never been grounds for discipline. All were either about to resign from the new party they never really embraced, or failed to provide clear statements of resignation when they had already functionally departed. Such figures seemingly escaped political censure from the Workers Party leadership. In contrast, the clearly ultra-left and often highly publicized views of Zack were met with banishment from the movement. The Oehlerites effectively called attention to

the Workers Party," contains a defense of Zack which reprints his 18 December 1934 statement of disagreement with the Workers Party trade union policy, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers. On Zack's expulsion see "Zack Expelled from Workers Party," *New Militant*, 6 July 1935; Minutes, Political Committee, 6 May 1935; 13 May 1935; 20 May 1935; Folder 6; "Statement of the Political Committee on the Expulsion of Joseph Zack," 4 June 1935, Folder 7, in PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee. At the end of the 1930s Zack would have traveled the full distance away from revolutionary politics to the right, providing anti-communist testimony to the Dies Committee.

125 Shachtman responds to the criticisms of Zack's expulsion in "Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?" 48-50.

this seeming inequity and, moreover, defended Zack's political opposition to "the Cannon caucus on the new orientation of the ICL and their SP line," as something that "was and remains correct." The campaign to link the Oehlerite horse to Zack's obstreperous wagon not surprisingly drew support from a number of quarters, including Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, and Pittsburgh, centers where anti-Cannon minorities in the old Communist League of America had put down some roots.¹²⁶

Cannon was tiring of the Oehlerite tide of political dissidence and obstruction. He was convinced that the bulk of Workers Party branches would stand firm against those whose behavior threatened to split and wreck the new party. He received a letter from former Pittsburgh AWP member, Louis Breier, in late May 1935, which began, "The Zack business and the Oehler-Stamm-Basky memorandum has thrown the Pittsburgh branch into wild confusion and happy days are here again." Old CLAers hostile to Cannon jumped on the Oehlerite bandwagon, condemning the actions of the Political Committee in

¹²⁶ On the turmoil around Zack see Arne Swabeck to Bronx Branch, 14 May 1935; Tom Stamm to Comrades, 31 May 1935, with an appended motion, "To the Political Committee," no date; A.J. Muste to Dr. A. Konikow, 3 June 1935; A.J. Muste to Dr. William Konikow, 11 June 1935; Hugo Oehler to Dear Comrade, 14 June 1935; Workers Party, National Committee, Pittsburgh Plenary Session, Minutes, 15 March 1935; Night Session of National Committee, 19 March 1935, attachment, "Trade Union Proposals"; Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 20 May 1935, "Zack Question [telegram]," and attachment, Basky, Oehler, Stamm, "To the members of the NC, to the branches, to the members of the Workers Party"; 22 May 1935; 27 May 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355; Basky, Oehler, Stamm, "On Zack," Roll 5, Reel 3348, MS Papers; Cannon to A.J. Muste, 22 May 1935, Reel 3, JPC Papers, pushed Muste to deal with the resignation of Budenz forthrightly, so that "a splitting faction" could no longer "make political capital out of an issue that no longer exists as far as the Political Committee is concerned." Muste addressed Budenz's old AWP slogan, "The American Approach," in a four-part series in the *New Militant*, 11 May 1935; 18 May 1935; 25 May 1935; 1 June 1935, and Budenz's resignation from the Workers Party was covered in "L. Budenz Resigns from Workers Party," *New Militant*, 1 June 1935, with Muste tasked with providing commentary. Note Muste, "A Reply to Liberal Critics of Bolshevism," *New Militant*, 6 July 1935; 13 July 1935; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 207–209. See also Hentoff, ed., *Essays of A.J. Muste*, 168–174; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 99–100. The controversy over Budenz's, "For an American Revolutionary Approach," an article in Calverton's *Modern Monthly*, 9 (March 1935), 14–18, came to a head with the Political Committee of the Workers Party, desirous of keeping Budenz involved in active party work, writing to all branches of the WP to express its disagreement with the article, but with former AWP figures such as Johnson and Howe disagreeing, and Stamm, on behalf of himself, Oehler, and Basky, leading a charge against Budenz and what they considered all rightist elements in the Workers Party. Budenz soon resigned. See Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 25 March 1935; 28 March 1935; 8 April 1935, with attachment, Swabeck to Johnson, Howe, Traux; 22 April 1935; 27 May 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers.

expelling Zack, but Breier and the majority of the branch were determined to fight back, demanding that charges be brought against Oehler and Company, with strong sentiment for expulsion, and that disciplinary measures be implemented against their local supporters. "All this sounds pretty hot," wrote Breier, but he asked angrily, "what in the name of the thrice-vilified Lenin could be done about it." What riled Breier and others was that, "If there ever was a chance to consummate fusion in Pittsburgh, it is deadlier than last year's duck with the outcropping of factionalism." Before fusion could proceed, Breier was convinced that factionalism had to be "liquidated thoroughly." Among the bulk of the branch, Breier assured Cannon, support for the Political Committee was solid: "We aren't afraid of our democratic privileges. We don't think we are being rushed into the sp."¹²⁷

Cannon conveyed his frustration in a long letter to Muste on 2 May 1935. He pointed out that the Party as a whole was in "a very ugly mood and the most responsible people are all convinced that a resolute policy is indispensable." The branches were lining up, approximately 3–1, in favor of supporting the Political Committee's actions, and militants in locals like Minneapolis were almost unanimous in their rejection of Oehler, fatigued by the flood of documents they were receiving. But Cannon was clearly irked at the Bronx branch, "which voted to condemn me and pin a bouquet on Zack." He did not enjoy hearing that even in Minneapolis there were those, such as Carl Cowl, who thought that Oehler was being dealt with "a little too roughly" and that without a full Party discussion it would not be prudent to move against his factionalism with precipitous dispatch. Cannon was in no mood to delay. He tried to draw Muste on board with a forceful repudiation of the Oehler-Zack campaign, headed as it was by the "accusation that we are going to join the Socialist Party, while they, of course, like true revolutionists, are going to build an independent revolutionary party. They argue that since the Bolshevik-Leninists in France and some other countries have become factions of the respective Socialist Parties, that we in America must willy-nilly do the same. ... Such little details as the fact that the w.p. is an independent organization, operating in a completely different milieu from that of the European revolutionary groups, do not reassure them at all as to our intentions. Somebody – they say "Cannon" – has it in the back of his head to join the Socialist Party and on this supposition their whole disruptive factional activity is founded." Cannon urged Muste to join him in confronting "a fanatical – one might say pathological – opposition that cannot be cured by persuasion."

127 Louis Breier to Cannon, 27 May 1935, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

He also communicated with Glotzer, aware that the Chicago leader was somewhat on board with his views politically, but distanced from him personally. He tried to impress on Glotzer that Oehler and others were sowing confusions as to what it might be possible to regroup from the Socialist and Communist parties respectively, stressing that, "The united front as we see it involves far more than the mere general formula. We are interested in bringing together those organizations which are capable of a minimum of cooperation and of bringing our party forces into contact with actual mass movements. That is far more important to us than the mere consolation of standing for unity with everybody in principle and getting no united action at all." Knowing Glotzer's alienation from the New York leadership, Cannon acknowledged that more party discussion would be welcomed, but he also expressed fear that "at the rate at which the pseudo-lefts are travelling on the path of outright disruption it appears that the discussion will have to be conducted somewhat along the lines of the discussion with the Field clique – that is, in the course of a fight to maintain the party organization." To Dunne, Cannon wondered what the "position of Weber" might be.¹²⁸

Opposition to the French turn and other issues that became contentious within the Workers Party during the first six months of 1935 were associated with the growing anti-Cannon appetite of what Shachtman would call "unprincipled combinationism." Significant figures in the Workers Party continued to draw from the poisoned well of personalized factionalism that fixated, in constant sniping attack, on the ostensible shortcomings of the Cannon regime. Seemingly in agreement with the *policies* of Cannon-Shachtman-Swabeck in this period, including fusion with the AWP and the French turn, this bloc, which included Spector, Glotzer, Abern, Weber, and the Chicago organizer John Edwards, managed to support positions contrary to the ultra-left machinations of Oehler and Zack at the same time that it aligned with these political opponents in votes against an established leadership. Abern's apolitical cliquism fueled a part of this factional drive, with Hansen later commenting that the office functionary's "perspective was ... *the most conservative in the party*," precisely because it avoided any attempt to assess the situation on the basis of

128 On Cannon's correspondence with comrades concerning the Oehler Group in May 1935 see Vincent Ray Dunne to Cannon, Thursday, no date (May 1935); Cannon to Muste, 22 May 1935; Cannon to Glotzer, 23 May 1935; Cannon to Dunne, 24 May 1935; Draft Letter to All Members and Alternates of the NC, no date [May 1935?], Reel 3, JPC Papers. See also Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 22 May 1935; 27 May 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers.

political principle. Shachtman saw the Weber-Abern clique less dispassionately, painting his criticism in broad strokes of invective: “established essentially by do-nothing grumblers, impotent malcontents, retired tent-sulkers and the like, and based upon gnawing personal antipathies and anticipated by non-existing differences of opinion.” Weber’s attempts to crystallize a group proceeded on the basis of an overly-clever and politically opaque balancing act, starting “with the French question as a club [to] prevent the Oehlers from falsely corraling the sentiment of the League against the majority and its methods of doing business.” This perhaps addressed politics less obliquely than was Abern’s inclination, but it ended up, ironically, in a Shachtman-designated “unprincipled combination,” with Abern at its center, a not entirely unpredictable development given Weber’s animosities to Cannon and his views on the American Socialist Party. “[T]here is not the slightest sign of its moving rapidly to a centrist position,” Weber wrote in late 1934, adding that the SP leader, Norman Thomas, “far from orienting the party for a break with extreme reformism puts unity with the rights above everything else.”¹²⁹

Not surprisingly, then, the first six months of the AWP-CLA fusion were marred by disputes, turmoil, indecision, and a lack of effectively coordinated campaigns. There were significant attempts to engage the newly-created Workers Party in mass work, especially among rubber and auto workers in Toledo, in the trucking sector in the Northwest, organizing the jobless, and through united front activities like building May Day celebrations/protests, some of these being fronts where the AWP and CLA had made significant earlier inroads. As promising as unemployed work may have seemed, with considerable Musteite success in this field spear-headed by the left-winger, Anthony Ramuglia, Cannon and others in the Workers Party found it particularly tough to *sustain* momentum among the jobless, and to crystallize “something firm and stable for the revolutionary movement.” It convinced Cannon that fundamental instabilities present in organizing the unemployed made the task of winning those locked out of the labor market to revolutionary politics and keeping them

129 Shachtman, “Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?” which contains much on Weber and his circle, designated the Weberites or the Abern-Weber faction (esp. 31, 35, 57); Weber to Glotzer, 26 October 1934, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers; Hansen, “The Abern Clique,” 6. Weber’s animus to Cannon would prove longstanding and is perhaps revealed most decisively in the unpublished typescript, addressing the Socialist Workers Party in the 1940s, Jack Weber, “The Fetishism of Formulas: An Analysis of the Politics of Cannonism,” 55pp, Carl Cowl Papers, Box 1, Tamiment Institute, New York University, New York, New York.

committed was a forlorn endeavor. He came to see that the power of the working class lay among the “employed workers in the factories ... the real base of the revolutionary party.” The difficult slogging of mass work, however well-intentioned and whatever the limited successes, was always inhibited in the first half of 1935 and beyond by the obvious intensification of Workers Party factionalism, which left many rank-and-file activists confused if not dispirited.¹³⁰ Events in March and June 1935 revealed the extent to which the WP was stalemated.

9 Ousting the Oehlerites

A Pittsburgh conference of Workers Party activists was hijacked by Oehler, Stamm, and Zack, turning into what Cannon later described as “a horrible fizzle.” The ultra-left Bolshevizing forces unleashed “an unrestrained free-for-all factional fight,” turning an opportunity for an Active Workers Conference composed of recently merged AWP and CLA organizers to discuss common collaborations and the difficulties of practical political work into a “shambles” of factional argument, denunciation, and sectarian posturing around an array of largely international, if critically important, questions. This must have left the old Musteitites reeling. Ted Selander, a former AWP industrial organizer in Ohio, recalled decades later that the Oehlerites “filibustered every point on the agenda,” completely disrupting the proceedings. Cannon, only recently returned to New York from his cross-country tour, and Shachtman, consumed by responsibilities associated with the Workers Party office, were perhaps insufficiently prepared for the extent to which Oehler and Stamm, now aligned with Zack, were willing to sacrifice the purpose of the Pittsburgh gathering on the altar of sectarian factionalism. Muste ended up aligned with Cannon, Shachtman, and Swabeck, to beat back the “wild men” and “stem the factional hysteria,” but this only lulled Cannon into thinking he had a potential ally in the former preacher. Burnham [West] tried to assuage the claims that there was little analysis in any discussions of the Socialist Party about its actual political

¹³⁰ Max Shachtman (?) to Lester Hackman, Allentown, Pennsylvania, 13 January 1935, Roll 12, Reel 335, MS Papers; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 205–207; “Allard Leads Illinois Jobless on Capitol,” *New Militant*, 11 May 1935; “Unemployed Leagues Hold Mass Conventions,” *New Militant*, 15 June 1935; “A Survey of the Automobile Industry,” *New Militant*, 6 July 1935; “NUL Calls National Caravan,” *New Militant*, 20 July 1935.

composition, by classifying the groupings within the SP as Right, Right Centrist, Left Centrist, and Marxist, noting that the Workers Party oriented to the latter two contingents, with whom it would struggle to achieve unity on the basis of a revolutionary program, being prepared, if necessary, to “become the official Socialist Party.” This was not likely to win over Oehler and Company, and nothing was decisively settled with respect to what was becoming an entrenched impasse.

Political Committee meetings of the Workers Party became a war zone. Oehler and Stamm clashed repeatedly with Cannon, but were unable to rally anyone else to their increasingly strident sectarian stand. Castigating what they now labeled “the right tendencies in the party,” Oehler and Stamm aligned with Zack and pilloried Cannon for carrying on an “open factional struggle ... against the left,” claiming that he was bent on excluding and expelling all of those dedicated to “building the independent revolutionary party of the workers.” Dismissive of “Cannon’s line of orienting toward the social democracy,” Oehler repeatedly charged that the dispute over the Socialist Party had to be resolved politically. Insisting that Cannon was campaigning “to annihilate all of those” opposed to his positions, Oehler warned of a Workers Party drift into “a social democratic opportunist morass.” As Stamm and Basky were caught out circulating Political Committee statements to the membership, Cannon preferred charges against this widespread distribution of documents without the PC’s authorization, demanding to know if Oehler had been part of this violation of discipline. There was further allegation that the peripatetic organizer abandoned his posting in the Illinois mining districts to carry on the New York factional struggle. For his part, Oehler dismissed such claims as “factional demagoguery” and insisted that normal procedures around the circulation of Political Committee materials no longer applied as “the party is in a crisis and the membership must be aroused to prevent Cannon and his associates from carrying through their wholesale expulsion policy.” Demanding access to the press to air their views, Oehler, Stamm, and Basky, upped the decibel level of denunciation, attacking what they routinely referred to as the Cannon-Shachtman regime, which they assailed as “insufferably bureaucratic and dishonest. It must be extirpated. ... We refuse to make ourselves accomplices of these comrades in their suppressions.” Oehler, Stamm, and their supporters dedicated themselves to “smash the blockade of Cannon-Shachtman.”

It was this context of ongoing opposition, denunciation, and condemnation that galvanized Cannon in May 1935 to gear up for a decisive confrontation, one that would take place at the June 1935 Plenum of the Workers Party. The possibilities for an unambiguous resolution of the factional imbroglio of mid-1935 were enhanced somewhat by clearing the political table of the debris Zack

had been assiduously cluttering the life of the New York Workers Party with for some months.¹³¹

When the National Committee of the Workers Party convened in June, upwards of 20 delegates thrashed out an array of dueling motions in closed Plenum sessions. Tensions in the meetings, scheduled for three days, but which actually dragged on for a marathon week of daily and nightly discussions (15–21 June) were high, the run-up to the Plenum having been a series of conflictual Political Committee gatherings. Cannon and Shachtman were convinced that developments in the Socialist Party suggested an ongoing process of political realignment that necessitated a willingness to address the situation boldly. They further believed that the Workers Party could ill afford to bear the cross of endless factional acrimony. In their view, the new organization was being crucified by what Cannon undiplomatically referred to, in a private communication to Muste that was later circulated broadly, including to anti-Cannon elements such as Oehler and Stamm, as “the malcontents and ultra-left extremists of the lunatic fringe.” Cannon later claimed that this characterization was of Zack, but it did little to assuage those who felt he was targeting Oehler and his supporters, tarring them with a wide brush of denunciation, preparing the ground for an expulsion.¹³²

131 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 202–203; Ted Grant [Ted Selander], in Les Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him: By Thirty-Three Comrades, Friends, and Relatives* (New York: Pathfinder, 1976), 93–94; Cannon to Glotzer, 23 May 1935; Cannon to Dunne, 24 May 1935, Reel 3, JPC Papers; “Zack Expelled from Workers Party,” *New Militant*, 6 July 1935. For a public statement on the Active Workers Conference which strips away much, if not all, contention, see “W.P. Progresses on All Fronts, National and International, Marked at Pittsburgh Conference,” *New Militant*, 23 March 1935. For a hint of the controversies, see Workers Party, National Committee, Pittsburgh Plenary Session, 15 March 1935; Night Session of National Committee, 19 March 1935, attachments, “West Resolution Referred to in Pittsburgh NC Minutes and Active Workers Conference,” Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers. The war of positions in the Workers Party Political Committee is outlined in Workers Party, Minutes, Political Committee, 9 March 1935; 28 March 1935; Minutes, Pittsburgh Plenary Session, National Committee, Workers Party, 15 March 1935, Folder 4; Minutes, Political Committee, 1 April 1935; 22 April 1935; Oehler Memorandum, Political Committee, 1 April 1935, Folder 5; Minutes, Political Committee, 13 May 1935; 20 May 1935; 22 May 1935, Folder 6; Minutes, Political Committee, 3 June 1935; 10 June 1935, Folder 7; Minutes, Political Committee, 8 July 1935; 29 July 1935, Folder 8; Statement by Oehler and Stamm in Reply to the Charges and Statement of Joe Hirsh and Kim Dolson, 13 August 1935; An Appeal to the Workers Party Against the NY District Convention, no date [August 1935?], Folder 9, all in PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee.

132 On developments in the Socialist Party in this period and in subsequent months see “Old Guard Pounds Militants as Socialist Party NC Meets,” *New Militant*, 13 July 1935; “Reveal

Cannon's account of the June 1935 NC Plenum in *The History of American Trotskyism* notes that he, Shachtman, Swabeck and others came to the meeting prepared to do battle with the Oehlerites.¹³³ It also details the shifting forces within the Workers Party. Muste gravitated to Oehler, largely because they both shared an aversion to the French turn in general and to any entrism initiative with respect to the Socialist Party in the United States, a position now identified with Cannon-Shachtman, and one that Burnham had come to embrace. Muste, whom Cannon described as "too much of a gentleman ever to deal" with hardened political opponents in the manner that they deserved, was growing fearful and discontented with Cannon's resolute resistance to Oehler, Zack, and others. A bloc of Abern-Weber-Glotzer and the former CLAer, Chicago's Norman Satir, oscillated between these political positions, endorsing the French turn, claiming a "complete accord with the views expressed in the Cannon Resolution on International Relations," declaring the Oehler Group's opposition to the French turn "principled," but rejecting the "whole course pursued by this group," citing, as well, its "flagrant violations of party discipline." If there were no actual clear political differences between this bloc and the proposed policies of Cannon and Shachtman, there was much antipathy to the internal, conflictual life of the Workers Party. Cannon was condemned as "venomous," a leader who calibrated problems of political difference with "the yardstick of organizational measures" such as expulsion. This supposedly intensified an "abnormal" split mentality, which the Abern-Weber-Glotzer-Satir combination also saw as common among the Oehlerites. Casting a plague on both contending houses, Satir and Glotzer ended one document with the statement, "If there is no rejection of the practices and courses pursued by the Oehler and Cannon groups on the internal situation the idea of keeping the Party together will become futile."¹³⁴

Background of Fight By Militants in Teachers Union for Real Democracy," and "Old Guard Swamps Militants at SP Meet," *New Militant*, 20 July 1935; Joseph Carter, "Militants Capture YPSL Convention," *New Militant*, 27 July 1935; A.J. Muste, "What Next in the Socialist Party?" *New Militant*, 10 August 1935. On Cannon's attacks see Cannon to Muste, 22 May 1935, Reel 3, JPC Papers; and his defensive statements, in the main confirmed by Muste and McKinney, in Workers Party, June 1935 National Plenum, Minutes of Control Commission, 16 June 1935; Minutes of Control Commission, 16 June, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers.

133 For a key statement see "Cannon-Shachtman Resolutions," June 1935 Plenum, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers.

134 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 202, 210–212; Shachtman, "Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?"; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 251–260; James P. Cannon to All Members and Alternates of the NC, no date, but a pre-Plenum document, May 1935?, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Workers Party, June 1935 Plenum, National Committee, Minutes of the Control Commission, 16 June 1935; Norman Satir and Albert Glotzer, "State-

The June Plenum was a battleground, and for all that Cannon's published account conveys something of this, it understates the vehement antagonisms of the sessions. A Control Commission was constituted, chaired by Burnham, to address Tom Stamm's allegations (premised on claims made by an SP member) that Cannon had conducted secret meetings with Old Guard Socialist Party figures, August Claessens and Louis Waldman; that in his discussions with the RPC, now known as the Revolutionary Policy Publication Association [RPPA], he expressed a lack of confidence in the Workers Party, putting forward an unwarranted optimism about what could be expected from some of the Militants; advised the SP left-wing not to leave the social democratic party but to burrow deeper into it; that the "lunatic fringe" of the WP would soon be expelled; and, finally, that Max Shachtman was volunteering his editorial services to the *Socialist Call*. For the most part, these allegations were denied and convincingly disproven, leaving Oehler and Stamm alone in voting against the Commission's report. But factional animosity hardened, with Cannon apparently stating that, "I am sorry I am talking in the same room with Oehler and Stamm and Basky. Do not ask us to collaborate with blackguards and slanderers."

In their Resolution on International Relations, Cannon and Shachtman railed against the factional assault on the ICL's French turn. They rejected the inflammatory description of European comrades as "capitulators," "betrayers of the Fourth International," "liquidators," "Centrists," "assistants of social patriots," and "Mensheviks," all part of the vocabulary of denunciation associated with Oehler, Zack, Stamm, Basky, and Eiffel. In a statement on "The Internal Party Situation," Cannon, Shachtman, Burnham, Swabeck, Sam Gordon, Morris Lewit, alternate delegate George Clarke, and Spartacus Youth Club members Manny Geltman [Garrett] and Viscount, disputed claims of Oehler and Stamm that the Workers Party regime was undemocratic and that they had been refused access to party assignments, committees, and the press. This leading group refused to concede that all disciplinary measures arising "out of the party controversy" be "dismissed." Cannon and his allies insisted that this would amount to being complicit in "an irresponsible action."¹³⁵

ment on the Internal Situation to the June Plenum," no date; Norman Satir, Jack Weber, and Albert Glotzer, "Supplementary Statement Appended to Resolution on International Relations, June 1935 Plenum," Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers; Workers Party, Minutes Political Committee, 24 June 1935, Folder 7, PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee.

¹³⁵ The above paragraphs quote from and draw on Workers Party, 1935 June Plenum, National Committee, Minutes, Evening Session, 16 June 1935; Minutes of Control Commission, 16 June 1935; 17 June 1935; Cannon and Shachtman, "Resolution of International Relations

Cannon later suggested that the Plenum was “thrown open to the membership,” and that he and others wore down their opponents. There is some truth in this, and one onlooker at the Plenum remembered that at its close, “Jim was still going strong but the rest of us were near exhaustion.” Still, the actualities and outcomes were more mixed. Plenum sessions were for the most part closed, with Stamm at first petitioning for a wide membership admission, a request that failed to secure consent. Complaints were received mid-session that the National Committee, having announced that the proceedings of the Plenum were to be restricted, nonetheless permitted Workers Party members to eavesdrop at the door. Cannon then moved that open sessions be held at the Party headquarters, but this approach was also voted down. Finally, on a third day of the Plenum, with the hour of adjournment set at 1AM, Shachtman moved that Workers Party members be allowed to sit at the back of the hall, the vote carrying 7–6. Even the mild-mannered Muste was losing something of his composure, referring to his old AWP comrade, James Burnham, as a “Cannon stooge.” In this tempestuous environment, and with an array of motions and counter-motions securing close and complicated votes depending on the issues at stake and the voting alignments that resulted, it is difficult to see that anything definitive came out of the June Plenum, except to stiffen Cannon’s already entrenched resolve to fight Oehler to the finish.

The Cannon-Shachtman orientation to the Socialist Party was now to engage the left wing and facilitate its development; encourage WP-SP collaborative work; and, more controversially and more difficult, to form fractions of Workers Party members that might function inside the Socialist Party. On formal entry, Cannon and Shachtman simply refused to do more than “keep the question open and await developments.” As the minority group at the June Plenum, Cannon and Shachtman had to tread carefully, and their motion on work in the SP carried by a vote of 9–7, but only after an amendment watered down their position. Muste successfully pressed the Political Committee to issue a public declaration in the name of the Plenum “denying the statements and rumors spread by Party enemies to the effect that the Workers Party intends to enter the SP,” emphasizing that “not a single member or leader of the SP has made

of the WPUS,” June 1935 Plenum of the NC; Muste, McKinney, Johnson, Selander, K. Lore, “Statement on the Internal Party Situation”; Basky, Stamm, Oehler, “Resolution on Internal Situation”; Cannon et al., “Statement on the Internal Party Situation, June 1935 Plenum”, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers. Cannon’s meetings with the RPPA were reported in Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 10 June 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers.

any proposal that the WP enter the SP and that all statements and rumors to the contrary are false.”¹³⁶

Given that entry later came to pass, many commentators, including Muste, attributed to Cannon a specific deviousness, if not dishonesty. Yet what happened was never pre-determined. The tactical choice for or against entry was the product of evolving circumstances, and adaptation to them. Cannon later wrote:

They accused us of deliberately planning to join the Socialist party, of concealing our aims in order to maneuver the membership in stages. Many party members believed this accusation for a time, but there was no truth in it. It was impossible at that time, as we understood the situation in the SP, to take a more definite position. We did not propose to join the SP at that time but we refused to bar the way to such future decision by a declaration in principle against it.

Later in the summer, more evidence indicated that the Socialist Party was in the kind of flux that suggested revolutionary possibilities. Cannon remained of the view that the Socialist Party was unlikely to be the center of any organizational regroupment of the revolutionary left in the United States. “[A] completely independent movement of which the Workers Party represents the fundamental nucleus” was, for Cannon, a more likely beneficiary of the quickly changing prospects of the broad left. “Our reasons for taking the independent path,” concluded Cannon, “have only been strengthened by the recent developments in the SP. We have no doubt that further experience of the revolutionary socialists will bring them to the same conclusion.”¹³⁷

Ted Selander, a Musteite then affiliated with the anti-Cannon bloc of Oehler, Muste, and Abern (whose pseudonym, Ted Grant, often led to confusion with the well-known British Trotskyist of the same name), came to the Workers Party

¹³⁶ Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 210–213; Ted Grant in Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 97; Workers Party, June 1935 Plenum, National Committee, Minutes, 15 June 1935; Second Session, 15 June 1935; Second Session, 17 June 1935; Evening Session, 21 June 1935; Cannon and Shachtman, “Resolution on Party Discipline” and “Resolution on Work in the Socialist Party”; Muste, “June 1935 Plenum Statement on s.p.,” Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers; “Plenum of WP Spikes False Rumor,” *New Militant*, 6 July 1935.

¹³⁷ Hentoff, *Peace Agitator*, 92–93; Hentoff, ed., *Essays of A.J. Muste*, 164–165; Muste, “My Experience in the Labor and Radical Struggles of the Thirties,” in Simon, ed., *As We Saw the Thirties*, 141–142; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 212–213; Cannon, “At the Crossroads in the Socialist Party,” *New Internationalist*, 2 (August 1935), 151–153.

conference well-prepped about American Trotskyism's leading figure. He had been warned about Jim's bureaucratic inclinations and administrative laxity, but he was also primed to expect "a dirty, roughhouse factional fighter." Rumors abounded that Cannon had been promised the vice-presidential candidacy on the Norman Thomas-headed 1936 election ticket if he delivered Workers Party members to the Socialists. As the Control Commission shredded these fables and the Plenum proceeded, Selander began to appreciate that there was more to Cannon than the gossip mongering against him suggested. He warmed to Cannon circulating among the Plenum crowd, taking the time to talk to those aligned with Muste, giving them the respect of reasoned argument rather than factional dismissal. Seeing Cannon speak authoritatively in the packed hall, outlining rationally and fairly the positions of his opponents, and detailing how an orientation to the Socialist Party was absolutely necessary if the Workers Party was ever to become a mass organization, Selander came to appreciate just how effective the Marxist method could be in the hands of a skilled revolutionary. He saw, as well, how different it was from his old leader Muste's consensus-building amalgamation of positions, which tended to reconcile oppositional orientations. Selander described the hush that came over the hall, as Cannon, seated on the podium, "a carton of milk for his ulcer in front of him," rose to address the Plenum, his speech lasting 90 minutes:

We fully expected him to shout brutal insults, loud denunciations, etc., but to our complete surprise Jim spoke quietly, calmly, and convincingly in a language that any ordinary worker could understand. He began with a rich, all-sided examination of the rapid changes that were taking place in the SP, painstakingly explaining why it was important for us to give our major attention to the emerging left wing. Because the SP was much larger than we were, the ferment in its ranks was attracting and recruiting activists and rebel youth while the WP was stymied. There wasn't much time to take advantage of this opportunity because the Stalinists and Love-stoneites were ready to move in and grab off these militants. He reminded us that the WP was not yet a party, simply the propaganda nucleus with which we could build a mass workers' party. He spelled out the methods we would use, e.g., more articles about them in our press, personal contacts, establishment of Trotskyist fractions. Exactly how we would unify our forces organizationally with their best elements would have to await further developments. Finally, he said, this question will not be settled here; we will launch a full-scale democratic discussion with the aim of educating the whole party. ... This Bolshevik method of a free, democratic, organized factional struggle to settle serious differences over program and

policy was brand new to us. ... Jim's speeches gave us our first lesson in the ABCs of principled Marxist politics ... [his] critical analysis was a revelation.

For Selander, and for others who found their way into alliance with Oehler, Muste, and Abern, Cannon's careful exposition of the ways in which "organizational fetishism" and "rigid ultraleftism" blurred into one another in "unprincipled combinationism," won them over to a new perspective. They now regarded Cannon as a "serious working class leader, and a man not to be trifled with in his drive to build a proletarian party." The Musteite Morris Chertov confirmed this assessment. He noted that in the marathon Plenum sessions, "Cannon's method in fitting us for the new tasks that faced Trotskyists" consisted of educating the ranks of the Workers Party to changing realities in which it was critical to "comprehend the evolution of the new, developing out of the old, in conflict with it," and how to be "on guard that the outward form not deceive us as to the true inner content."

These lessons registered in appreciation that it was necessary to see past the discredited political label of social democracy to grasp that "hundreds of revolutionary workers" were being drawn to Norman Thomas and the Socialists. Reaching these workers, "potential recruits to revolutionary socialism [who] would fall prey to reformist or Stalinist leadership and instead of strengthening the revolutionary forces in America would be used against us by our enemies," was essential. The Plenum did not settle the matter definitively, as Cannon indicated it could not, but it took strides toward reconstituting the ranks. Some in the Muste camp began to urge their former leadership to join with Cannon and Shachtman in a political fight "to isolate and defeat the Oehlerite disrupters because they were the immediate danger to the unity of the party."¹³⁸

There were, as well, other problems. The Workers Party was in the throes of a serious financial crisis. Efforts to turn the *New Militant* into an eight-page weekly as the first step to going daily were flagging. Grandiose understandings of the organization of the New York office had been undertaken with Muste and Cannon departing for their tour; Burnham's influence could perhaps be perceived in the rental of a stupendous "place on the corner of Fifteenth Street and Fifth Avenue," with "offices of all kinds for the different officials and dignitaries." Cannon was dumbfounded at the expense – \$150 or \$175 a month –

138 Ted Grant and Morris Chertov in Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 95–96, 103–105.

as well as the installation of a switchboard, with a woman plugging in calls to a bank of phones. "It looked good while it lasted," huffed the old Wobbly, noting it did not take long for the grim reality to register with the Workers Party leadership. Before January 1935 had run its course, the Political Committee was discussing ways of alleviating the crisis, prompting Oehler to propose a "20% cut for the whole staff." In late May Cannon wrote to Glotzer: "We are in a fearful crisis. Next week we have to move to cheaper headquarters. Our phone is being shut off. Our bills for printing have been piling up and the print shop is in a dangerous crisis which threatens our existence."

The high hopes originally placed in Muste's capacity to raise funds among his liberal entourage soon dissipated. A January 1935 celebratory event for the old Brookwood College warhorse, commemorating his 50th birthday and his 15 years of service to the revolutionary labor movement, came to little. In spite of extensive sponsorship, including a wide array of progressives, among them Roger Baldwin, Max Eastman, John Hayes Holmes, Arthur Garfield Hayes, James Rorty, George Soule, Oswald Garrison Villard, and Reinhold Niebuhr, the Irving Plaza dinner was apparently something of a bust. "One by one," Cannon later related, "Muste's most generous contributors, on whom he had counted to help finance the expanded activities of the united party, fell away." The result was an acute belt-tightening and a scaling back of Workers Party initiatives: the new party was evicted from its Fifth Avenue premises, moving to a rather "unprepossessing old loft on Eleventh Street."¹³⁹

Cannon was used to facing financial exigencies. He found the break from Oehler and Stamm more troubling. Oehler had originally come to Cannon's attention through reports from his old Kansas City comrade, Shorty Buehler.¹⁴⁰ During the late stages of the communist underground in 1920, Cannon forged an intimate, highly respectful, relationship with Oehler, a "new live wire" who assumed the leadership of the revolutionary movement in Kansas City. "He was

139 On the finances of the WP in this period, discussed in the above paragraphs, see A.J. Muste, "Eight-Page New Militant First Step to Daily Paper," *New Militant*, 29 June 1935; "New York Pledges \$1000 in Drive for 8-Page New Militant," *New Militant*, 6 July 1935; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 204–205; Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 21 January 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers; Cannon to Glotzer, 23 May 1935, Reel 3, JPC Papers; "Party Fund Drive Opened by National Committee," *New Militant*, 15 December 1934; "Muste Calls for Funds to Carry on Mass Work," *New Militant*, 22 December 1934; "Muste Dinner," *New Militant*, 29 December 1934; "WP Moves National Office, Takes Floor at 2W Fifteenth Street," *New Militant*, 19 January 1935. The Muste dinner apparently raised just under \$500. Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 7 January 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers.

140 Buehler died in 1934 as Oehlerite factionalism peaked in the WP. See George Clarke, "On 'Shorty' Buehler and Cora Duff," *The Militant*, 12 May 1934.

a dynamo of energy," Cannon later said, "well liked ... undemanding personally ... an instinctive mass worker," and an early recruit to the Trotskyist Communist League of America (Opposition). Coming to New York in 1931, Oehler was a Cannon ally, and the two became "very good friends as well as collaborators in the movement." Never asking for anything from the small and beleaguered original Trotskyist forces, Oehler impressed Cannon with his "capacity for sacrifice," later telling Harry Ring, "I thought him the picture of the ideal young revolutionist, dedicated, devoted." For Cannon, Oehler would always be considered a "real *leftist*," with the strengths of that designation as well as its potential to move toward isolation in a sectarian cul-de-sac.

Cannon's relationship with the younger Stamm was neither as longstanding nor as intimate as was the case with Oehler, but he worked closely with him and others "just out of high school," recruits like Sam Gordon and George Clarke. They proved a dedicated corps of Cannon organizers. Stamm, who joined the CLA in 1930, headed up the League's early work among the New York unemployed, was a Cannon field operative and, eventually, the business manager of *The Militant*. As we have seen, Stamm and the Shachtman-Glotzer-Abern forces were particularly antagonistic during the worst dog days of early League factionalism. Stamm proved one of the most ardent of Cannon loyalists, with the League leader unwilling to countenance jocular put-downs of Stamm's homosexuality.

Up until 1934, Cannon, Oehler, and Stamm had "always been completely together," with Cannon later remembering "a very agonizing separation" from these close associates. "It seems like it's always been my fate in politics to fall out with my close personal friends over political differences," Cannon reflected towards the end of his life, "It makes an emotional as well as a political problem." In 1935, Cannon was troubled by the extent to which Oehler and Stamm were becoming an "obstacle to the promotion of the genuine unification of the Muste people and our people." They proved stubborn, sectarian opponents of the French turn, "in direct conflict with the whole concept of a dialectical approach" to revolutionary politics and how to address movement, change, growth, and building the party.¹⁴¹

Another casualty in the Oehlerite fallout was the black revolutionary Simon Williamson. Williamson's Harlem political work and his impressive journalism in the *Militant* and *New Militant* ended as tensions mounted in the factional

141 The above paragraphs on Cannon's relations with Oehler and Stamm draw on Ring interview, 8 March 1974, 3–12; James P. Cannon, *Letters from Prison* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 298.

struggle over entryism. The African American revolutionary was disappointed and angered by his treatment on the part of white comrades, regardless of where they stood in the increasingly antagonistic factional line-ups. Frustrated at what he considered foot-dragging in developing work among the African American masses of Harlem, Williamson soon found himself alienated from Cannon's confidante and factional ally, Morris Lewit, the Harlem branch organizer and a prominent critic of Oehler. A proposed Williamson eastern tour of Workers Party locals, ostensibly arranged by Zack, apparently never materialized. As the Harlem work among blacks stalled, Williamson chafed under allegations that he had failed to report on the activities of the Inter-Racial Club and apparently criticized the "white chauvinism" of his co-workers in the Harlem branch of the WP, a charge that was dismissed as a provocation. Whether or not this dovetailed with opposition to the Socialist Party entry is not known, but Williamson was obviously on a collision course with Cannon and others. Soon he was ousted from the Workers Party, the expulsion, according to Williamson, being insufficiently opposed by Oehler and his supporters, who failed to rise to the occasion and defend their beleaguered comrade. Now estranged from both Cannon and Oehler, Williamson sought solace in the League for a Revolutionary Workers Party, struggling to continue his left-wing work among the Fieldites. He was essentially lost to Trotskyism's mainstream after 1935.

The subsequent reorganization of the Harlem branch of the Workers Party, where "the atmosphere of the organization" had ostensibly improved since "the Oehler split," exhibited few signs of overt work among African Americans. By the end of 1935, Workers Party activities among American blacks were reduced to a reluctant relationship with the nominal Socialist Party figure, Francis Henson, close to both the Communists and their Right Opposition, with whom he conferred regularly, drawing on the advice of Jay Lovestone. Henson proposed establishing a new "Negro quarterly" to be entitled *Race*. The Workers Party's Ernest Rice McKinney was instructed by the Political Committee to keep up a connection of sorts with this endeavor, sitting on a committee to establish the journal, but avoiding making any editorial contributions.¹⁴²

All of this took its toll on Cannon. He wrote to Vincent Ray Dunne on 30 April 1935, explaining why he could not come to Minneapolis: "[T]here are all kinds

142 On Williamson and the devolution of Harlem work see Phelps, "African American Revolutionary Socialists, 1928–1956"; Shachtman, "Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?" 47; "Report of Progress of Branch #1 in the Program of Action," 23 December 1935, 5, 11, Box 42, Folder 10, GB Papers, originally read in folder titled "1935 Minutes/Documents of Workers Party, Etc., NC Plenum." Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 4 November 1935, PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee.

of difficulties in the way which appear to make it impossible for the present. ... the financial situation is very critical here and there is no money on hand. On top of that my health which, as you will recall, was not very good when I saw you last, is causing me some trouble and it seems that I will have to take a little time out with medical attention and a strict diet." The exact physical ailments that Cannon battled are not known, but he was certainly plagued by stomach ulcers, and possibly contended with other afflictions. By mid-July 1935 Cannon had retreated to Bethel, Connecticut, apparently on doctor's orders, living solitary, with Rose Karsner remaining in New York. Shachtman was in close, cordial communication, promising to "dig up the fare or a car somewhere" and make the trip to see his close ally. Cannon was able to undertake writing assignments for the *New International* and keen to receive word of any communications from Trotsky. He absolutely refused, however, to return to New York to engage in fractious discussion meetings: "[I]t is simply out of the question. I am just beginning to feel a little benefit of the systematic diet and rest and a siege of discussion, exerting myself for a long speech and, what is still more aggravating, listening to long speeches of others, would throw me back I am in for a long grind which necessitates some caution. I will have to pay heavily for the failure to take time out before. That is all the more reason to be careful yet for a while since I have a start back on the upgrade." Cannon pressed Shachtman and Swaback to visit, reporting progress on his health and an impatience "to get back into the swing of activity." But he remained convinced that "the wiser course is to take more time and thus prepare for more effective participation in the party work."

Cannon did manage to produce an incisive analysis of the political differentiation going on inside the Socialist Party. He outlined the political reconciliation of Norman Thomas and Milwaukee's perennial electoral SP candidate, Daniel Hoan, outlined the influence within the SP of the conservative New York Old Guard, and dissected the vacillating capitulation of the ostensibly Left-Wing "Militants," such as Herbert Zam. It was the potential for revolutionary realignment evident in the Young People's Socialist League and Revolutionary Policy Publication Association that impressed Cannon and in which he invested hope for the future. Having "slaved" over the article for three days, Cannon concluded that those in the Socialist Party who were gravitating toward revolutionary politics should try to formulate their programmatic orientation and struggle to have it implemented within their party. Cannon was of the view that true revolutionaries inside the Socialist Party and outside of it in the Workers Party would eventually find themselves "in a common organization." Entry, at this point, was still not Cannon's ultimate tactical end. At some point, succumbing to the demands of the Workers Party, Cannon returned to New York,

but he maintained residence in Bethel into August and September 1935, where he was visited by Shachtman, himself recovering from a health problem that necessitated minor surgery.¹⁴³

During this time Cannon, with Shachtman's close collaboration if not direct contribution, wrote an assessment of the internal Workers Party situation, forwarded to Trotsky and the International Communist League. Meant as a private communication, the letter was eventually mistakenly published in an ICL bulletin, an error that Trotsky subsequently apologized for, explaining the indiscretion as a consequence of "haste and a lack of prudence."¹⁴⁴

Cannon characterized the post-June Plenum situation in the WP as one of "conflict" arising out of "the great opportunities which are opening up before it." Penned in mid-August 1935, after a weekend New York District Convention, the letter claimed that it drew on recent developments in the Workers Party, involving roughly one-third of the 700–1,000-member organization. Identifying four distinct Workers Party groups, the Cannon-Shachtman group, the Muste group, the Oehler group, and the Abern-Glotzer-Weber clique, the summary was undoubtedly self-promoting, with the Cannon-Shachtman contingent described as the "orthodox" tendency committed to the application of the principles and tactics of the ICL.

Composed of representatives of the former CLA and a good section of the AWP, including previous Musteite national leaders, Burnham [West] and the National Unemployed League organizer, Ramuglia, the Cannon-Shachtman group was able to claim 20 of the 29 delegates at the New York District gathering. Critical to the position of this group was its orientation to the Socialist Party, standing neither for an unbridled entryism nor a sterile, sectarian abstentionism:

143 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon to Dunne, 30 April 1935; Cannon to Shachtman, 10 (?) July 1935; 18 (?) July 1935; Cannon to Shachtman, 24 July 1935; Shachtman to Cannon, 20 August 1935; Ruth to Daddy, 26 August 1935, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Cannon to Shachtman, 24 July 1935, Box 42, Folder 10, GB Papers; James P. Cannon, "At the Crossroads in the Socialist Party," *New International*, 11 (August 1935), 151–153. The Political Committee of the Workers Party had released Cannon from his New York duties to go to Minneapolis to help in the struggle around the revoked charter of Local 574 and the orchestration of a red-baiting attack on the Trotskyist leadership of the union. Illness, however, prevented Cannon from making the Minneapolis trip. See Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 28 April 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers. On the illnesses of Muste, Cannon, and Shachtman in this period see Workers Party, Minutes, Political Committee, 8 April 1935; 30 April 1935; 6 May 1935, PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee.

144 See "Two Statements on the Cannon-Shachtman Letter: A Brief Remark, November 1935 & An Obvious Error, 13 November 1935," in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1935–1936]*, 182–183.

In the present deep ferment of the Socialist Party we see the possibility of crystallizing a serious left wing which, if it takes the right political line, can be brought to a break with the s.p., and a fusion with us. To this end we propose an active policy designated to aid this left socialist crystallization. To that end we devote considerable space in our press to the crisis in the s.p., direct a heavy fire against the centrist 'Militants', strive to push the proletarian tendency forward to collision with them and, at the same time, strive to inoculate the left socialists against Stalinism. We have had good success with this latter, and, in general, exert quite a little influence on certain strata of the left socialists. We are accused of preparing an entry of the w.p. into the Socialist Party. But this is not true at all. We simply do not want to leave the evolution of the left socialists to the well-known 'historic process'; we want a policy of active intervention and an unremitting striving for connections in the s.p. which can become the starting point for a fraction on the platform of the Fourth International and, consequently, an eventual unification with us. As a part of this work we demand that the w.p. seize every opportunity for united front actions and practical cooperation with the left socialists.

Cannon presented the group around Shachtman and himself as fighting against a "conservative passivity masked by verbal intransigence." This obstructionism manifested itself in overt Oehlerite opposition to the French turn and to parallel processes of fusion and regroupment. It thwarted the Workers Party's development from a "propaganda circle to political mass work." Standing in the way of this vital transformation, as well, was "a specific form of centrism represented by a part of the former AWP," now consolidating around Muste. Finally, Cannon identified a fourth tendency, more properly in his view designated a clique. It aided and abetted the explicit political oppositions of Oehler and Muste. This "unprincipled combination" coalesced around Weber, Glotzer, and Spartacus Youth leader, Nathan Gould, with Abern undoubtedly in the background, feeding factional "insider dope" to those craving New York-generated anti-Cannon gossip. This current was willing to bloc with other opposition groups, even though it was in political disagreement, so as to constantly raise criticisms of the organizational methods and bureaucratic regime of Cannon and Shachtman.

Oehler, the hardened political resistance to Cannon and Shachtman, commanded seven delegates at the New York meeting, a reflection of the localized strength of this faction, which could count on roughly 60 WP members in the metropolitan center. But Oehler won little support elsewhere. Vilifying the ICL as capitulationist, and maintaining a staunch opposition to the

SFIO entry, which it branded a disastrous failure, the Oehler group claimed the same liquidationist fate awaited the Workers Party if it did not resist the entryist inclinations of Cannon and Shachtman. Flagging in the aftermath of the June Plenum, Oehler, Stamm, and Basky appealed to the old Musteites by condemning the internationalism of the Workers Party, a campaign Cannon and Shachtman regarded as carrying a “decidedly reactionary tinge.” Before fusion, the Oehlerites opposed merger with the Musteites, “on the ground that we would be swallowed up by the centrists of the AWP; now they have no difficulty in allying themselves with the same centrists against us.”

Muste, drawn into a bloc with Oehler around overt resistance to the possibility of entry into the Socialist Party, rallied a small group that relapsed from its consistently progressive orientation to fusion in 1934. The strides forward made by former AWPers breaking from Budenz’s parochial national chauvinism and anti-Trotskyism halted. Strident in his opposition to the Cannon-Shachtman group, Muste recoiled from what he claimed was Cannon’s all-too-common mechanical recourse to exclusion, expulsion and “splits,” all of which would potentially weaken the Workers Party. This actually lost Muste some tested supporters, who gravitated to Cannon and Shachtman: Muste retained only two delegates at the New York August Conference, but it brought him into another bloc with a longstanding anti-Cannon element.

The Glotzer-Weber clique, which supported the policies of Cannon and Shachtman, embraced the French turn abstractly but denied that similar opportunities presented themselves to American Trotskyists. It clung to an opportunistic and convoluted understanding of “organic unity,” and missed no opportunity to rail against the “Cannon regime.” Again, this brought the Weberites, as they were often called, into political combinations with Muste and Oehler, even if the seeming political differences of these Workers Party currents seemed counterposed. As Cannon stressed, the three groups outside of the dominant Cannon-Shachtman circle in the Workers Party failed, up to the summer of 1935, to “formulate a common resolution on a single political question, but in practice they work as a bloc against us on all the organizational questions.” The unprincipled, cliquish nature of these bloc alignments were evident throughout 1934, with Glotzer being a particular conduit to Oehler, with whom he had old, established ties, and whose relations with Shachtman interested the Chicago NC member greatly.

Cannon complained that while he and Shachtman strove for unity, they were unprepared to sacrifice the politics of the Workers Party to a non-communist program. They feared turning the WP into an endless discussion group devoid of discipline and handcuffed in its capacity to act and intervene in the American class struggle. Having no intention to split the recently regrouped forces of

the Workers Party, Cannon thought it necessary to “convince a majority of the party” that the only way forward was through a renunciation of Oehler’s sectarianism, Muste’s centrism, and Weber’s and Glotzer’s muddled positions, which received only five percent of the votes at the New York Conference, failing to entitle them to a single delegate. For all of their political impotence, however, the Weberites had an influence among the Young Spartacans. A “straight-out fight” that might clarify the politics of the Workers Party in mid-1935 was constantly and consistently “sabotaged, ... the youth ... thrown into confusion by this unprincipled game.”¹⁴⁵

This factional free-for-all unleashed undisciplined behavior among the rank-and-file. Public meetings were punctuated with cries to defeat “the liquidators of the party” and intra-party clashes even culminated in violence. Philadelphia was rocked by internal crises, the worsening climate of mid-1935 degenerating most dramatically in the City of Brotherly Love. Workers Party branches divided into warring Cannonite and Oehlerite camps, the split at first further complicated by Zack’s maneuvers inside the Oehler group. The low point of this ugly implosion was a confrontation over “ownership” of various documents and CLA and WP Minutes, claimed by the Philadelphia Central Committee to rightfully belong to it. When a request to have this material returned to the branch aligned with Cannon and Shachtman was rebuffed, two Cannonites, Goodman and Brooks, took it upon themselves to break into a print shop that also served as the living quarters of two Oehlerites, Paul and Meyer Hirsh. Surprised in the act of absconding with a large bundle of documents, Goodman

145 The above paragraphs draw on James P. Cannon to the International Secretariat (Copy to Comrade Vidal), 16 August 1935, “File: Cannon Correspondence with Trotsky from the Trotsky Archives, Harvard University, passed on to George Breitman,” Prometheus Research Library, New York, New York. This letter is reproduced in the Prometheus Research Library reprint of Shachtman, *Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?* 72–75. Cannon’s 16 August 1935 letter did not mention Abern, but Trotsky later focused on the *continuity* of Abern’s faction, insisting that, “the Abern faction has existed uninterruptedly, statically, if not ‘dynamically.’” This Abern school, in Trotsky’s view, was “far less interested in principled questions,” than it was in “combinations at the top, personal conflicts and generally occurrences in the ‘general staff.’” See Leon Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 145. On Glotzer, Oehler, and the factional bloc alignments of 1934 see also Glotzer to Shachtman, 26 March 1934; 22 October 1934, Roll 11, Reel 3354, MS Papers. Shachtman, *Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?* 59, dates the birth of the Abern-Weber caucus from 20 January 1934, when the Shachtman-led anti-Cannon group of the dog days period disbanded, with Abern voting against the motion to end the faction as a group committed to fight “the Cannon regime.” See also A.J. Muste, Weber, et al., “Statement on the WPUS and the Policy of the French Turn,” attached to Workers Party, Minutes, Political Committee, 5 October 1935, Folder 11, PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee.

was accosted by Paul Hirsh, the two coming to blows, with Hirsh claiming Brooks struck him with a hammer or lead pipe. Claims were made that the raid intended “to destroy a mimeograph machine or other material allegedly being used for Oehler caucus purposes,” which included putting out an *International Bulletin* to be edited by Eiffel. Goodman and Brooks were subsequently suspended from the Workers Party, the former for one year, the latter for three months, their disciplinary judgement prefaced with the statement “That hooliganism has nothing in common with a revolutionary organization.” The affair was particularly embarrassing to Cannon and Shachtman, whose experience of Stalinist thuggery had played a role in convincing them of the righteousness of their programmatic critique of Comintern degeneration. An erstwhile Abernite, Joe Hansen, later noted that the Oehlerites, as well as others given to anti-Cannon prejudice, made a field day of certain catchwords at this time, with “Cannon hatchetmen” and “Cannon stooges” usefully complemented by the designation “Philadelphia thugs.” When newcomers to the Trotskyist movement heard such cries of condemnation they wondered to themselves if, in the presence of so much smoke, there must indeed burn the fires of bureaucratization and leadership degeneration.¹⁴⁶

When Cannon’s overview of the internal situation in the Workers Party, intended as a private communication to Trotsky, was erroneously widely distributed at the end of the year, it garnered harsh condemnation and rejoinders. Jack Weber and Albert Glotzer, in particular, wrote lengthy rebuttals, outlining their sharp disagreements, and accenting that, in all the differences that separated Workers Party groups, it had been the Weber-Glotzer contingent that struggled to politically resolve and clarify differences around the French turn, thereby isolating and marginalizing the Oehlerites, drawing the Musteites close to the internationalism of the ICL, and refusing the Cannon proclivity to “split,” demanding instead a political struggle for programmatic clarity. Muste, apparently repulsed by Cannon’s firm but forthright May 1935 letter to him outlining the deteriorating state of affairs within the Workers Party, was unwilling to confront the threat that the Oehlerites posed to the stability and possibilities of mass work. He recoiled from Cannon’s view (rooted in long experience with factionalism in left organizations) that a political fight was inevitably coming

146 Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 5 August 1935; 16 September 1935; Workers Party, “Report to the Branches on Philadelphia Incident,” 13 August 1935; “Statement by Joe Hirsh,” no date [July – August 1935?], 3 pp typescript; “Statement by Joe Hirsh,” [fragment] August 1935; A.J. Muste to All Branches, 14 August 1935; Basky, Oehler, and Stamm, “An Appeal to the PC of the Workers Party Against the NY District Convention,” Roll 12, Reel 335, MS Papers. Hansen, “The Abern Clique,” 8.

to the fore inside the WP. Muste, having witnessed the Oehlerites in action in June, and receiving a letter from Trotsky in which criticism of the Oehler Group was justified, returned briefly to the Cannon-Shachtman fold, setting the stage for a final, inevitable confrontation at the October WP Plenum. Cannon and Shachtman remained convinced that, "We must try to centralize all Marxist groups within the SP – some SPers are sympathetic to Trotskyism; very likely these elements can help build the Fourth International." With this Muste was never in agreement.¹⁴⁷

Cannon's and Shachtman's health problems undoubtedly slowed the summer process of trying to move the Workers Party forward. Ray Dunne wrote from Minneapolis to complain that comrades in the Midwest were receiving little if any communications from their like-minded New York-based National Committee members. The Minneapolis Trotskyist, unaware of the medical conditions of Cannon and Shachtman, thought the Party center was carrying notions of "fairness and objectivity a bit too far":

While from the Oehler camp came statement after statement and document after document growing more violent and unreasonable and outlandish as the weeks went by, we have heard absolutely nothing from you comrades at the center whom we support politically and whom we must rely upon for interpretation of groupings and line-ups that always develop at the center when questions of a principal nature are in dispute ... The older comrades feel that the Cannon-Shachtman resolutions will be pretty generally approved. Up to now there is no such thing as an Oehlerite or a Musteite in our branch.

Cannon sketched out a draft response to Dunne, indicating the necessity of building the Workers Party through principled political work with the solid elements fused in the CLA and AWP merger. He encouraged Dunne to connect with

147 Albert Glotzer to the International Secretariat, 20 November 1935; Jack Weber to the International Secretariat, 29 December 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355; Trotsky to Muste, 18 September 1935, Roll 3, Reel 3346, MS Papers; the Prometheus Research Library reprint of Shachtman, *Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?*; Hentoff, ed., *Essays of A.J. Muste*, 164; A.J. Muste, "How the Cannon-Shachtman Group Builds the Party," and "Footnote on Organizational Methods," in Workers Party, *Internal Bulletin*, 1 (August 1935), with the former also in Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers; Cannon to Muste, 22 May 1935, Reel 20, JPC Papers; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 210–211; Ted Grant in Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 97; Workers Party, Minutes, Political Committee, 9 December 1935; 11 December 1935; 23 December 1935, Folder 14, PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee.

former Musteite Ted Selander in Toledo. "This is more important," wrote Cannon, than "the Chicago clique people Glotzer and Satir. For the latter and their entire ... unprincipled combination I have nothing but contempt. It is necessary to smash this rotten tendency." But the key group presenting an obstacle to the party's development was undoubtedly the faction headed by Oehler, which Cannon saw as formulaic, sectarian, and disloyal. His notes concluded tersely: "Conflict irreconcilable. Not too much time to lose. This tendency must be defeated completely."¹⁴⁸

George Clarke complained to Bert Cochran that the Oehlerites were "in no small part responsible for the dereliction" of the New York Workers Party, where "the membership is by and large apathetic or unenthusiastic ... Inactivity is prevalent. Trade union work seems to be entirely behind the eight-ball." With Oehler's "disciplined faction" in a bloc with Zack, and obviously linked to an international group of Bauerites, rumors were circulating of the "shambles" the French turn had created inside the International Communist League and of Trotsky falling down on the job. With the Weberites and the Abernites "up to their old tricks," Clarke and Cochran speculated that "the old CLA factionalism" lay at the root of much of the impasse. Whatever the origins of the malaise, Clarke was frustrated and fatigued by hearing the Oehlerite refrain that, "The Cannons, Swabecks, and Shachtmans have led the Marxian CLA into the swamp of Musteite centrism only in order to lead it later into the SP."¹⁴⁹

Muste thus became a key player in the ongoing factional stalemate. Notwithstanding the former AWPers gravitating to Cannon and Shachtman, the old CPLA figurehead still commanded loyalties among a segment of Workers Party supporters, his prestige as the new party's National Chairman largely intact.¹⁵⁰ Both Shachtman and Burnham confided to Cannon that, for different reasons, they distrusted Muste's capacity to stay a revolutionary course. For Shachtman this was largely because in his view all centrists had the inclination to backslide, and he saw indications of this in Muste's constant complaint that, with respect to the Socialist Party and other matters, he had been "misled," and that he did not see "what was back of it." Muste had also insinu-

148 Vincent Ray Dunne to Cannon and Shachtman, 20 August 1935; Undated Notes [August 1935?], "For Vincent," Reel 3, JPC Papers.

149 Clarke to Cochran, no date [1935]; and a second undated letter, Clarke to Cochran [1935], Unnamed File, Box 1, Cochran Papers.

150 Even veteran CLAsers such as George Clarke could write that Muste had calmed down the New York Workers Party environment with A.J. handling some difficult meetings "admirably ... taking some of the criticism on the chin and handing out a few healthy wallops at those trying to make factional capital. His stock soared in my estimation" Clarke to Cochran, no date [1935], Unnamed File, Box 1, Cochran Papers.

ated that Cannon and Shachtman were, in his view, “illegally” and continually in contact with the International Communist League. “I dare say we are in for some breathtaking surprises at the amount of veering, squirming, changing and rationalizing that Muste will commit in the coming weeks and months,” concluded Shachtman. Burnham confirmed this. “Getting our friend to say Yes or No,” he wrote to Cannon after a three-hour meeting with Muste, “is rather like trying to pin down mercury.” With “no perspective beyond the next few days,” Muste was insisting, at the end of August 1935, that he was neither with Oehler nor with Cannon. If he deplored the former’s sectarianism and indiscipline, he was equally appalled at the latter’s opportunism, deviations, and “provocative, deceitful, and positively immoral organizational methods,” all of which explained Oehlerite violations. Muste imagined himself “the savior of the party,” according to Burnham, preserving democratic centralism and preventing it from becoming “the puppet of the brutal manipulators, Cannon and Shachtman.” Like Shachtman, Burnham thought it necessary to be “prepared for any depth of dirty work on Muste’s part (all the easier for him because he feels so self-righteous.)”¹⁵¹

Much of this would be borne out in Muste’s eleven-page internal bulletin document, “How the Cannon-Shachtman Group ‘Builds’ the Party.” It condemned the “grave errors, and in some cases crimes, against the party,” committed by the two advocates of entry. Muste was especially exercised by the deliberate and public attacks of Cannon on Zack, which were interpreted as a calculated prelude to the expulsion of the Oehlerites. What bothered Muste the most was his belief that Cannon and Shachtman suppressed a political discussion of the Oehler group’s position, and moved precipitously to discipline the dissidents, a discontent that, while overstated, perhaps had some merit. But Muste then descended into a kind of moralistic solipsism. He exaggerated both the extent to which the Oehlerites conducted a campaign for their political position, and denied the right of Cannon and Shachtman to struggle for and promote their views. Pilloried not only for their organizational recourse to suppression of the Oehler group and its political line, Cannon and Shachtman were attacked for putting “over their own SP line on the Party,” and especially for using the *New Militant* to voice endorsement of the French turn.

Muste also blamed the Cannon-Shachtman group for creating the internal organizational climate that led to the Goodman-Brooks assault on their Phil-

151 Shachtman to Cannon, 20 August 1935; Burnham to Cannon, 30 August 1935, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

adelphia Oehlerite comrade, Paul Hirsh. The old CPLAer insisted that “political positions and organizational methods are tied together,” asking “how long must bureaucratic methods be permitted to grow before they are attacked?” Acknowledging that neither Cannon nor Shachtman sanctioned the attack on Hirsh, Muste nevertheless claimed that, “in an atmosphere of heated and bitter factionalism, the more excitable members of the Party are likely to be betrayed into such violent excesses. C-S cannot escape their share of responsibility for the creation of such an atmosphere.”

Refusing to consider that developments within the Socialist Party had altered, Muste was repelled by Cannon’s attempts to change his mind. He insisted that claims made on the part of the Cannon-Shachtman group in 1934 and early 1935 contrasted with positions developing later in the same year. This dissonance could only be explained by disingenuousness. In direct contrast to some later statements of Muste’s that he had been promised, prior to the AWP-CLA fusion, that there would be no French turn in the United States, the old pacifist’s critique of Cannon-Shachtman in 1935 argued that the issue of entering the Socialist Party had been present at the very beginning of the merger, with Muste likening political debate to the hostilities of war:

It is by now sufficiently clear that the question of who **opened** this discussion is like the question of who fired the opening shot in an international war. The Oehlerites were by no means alone in instigating whatever turmoil existed in the party in the early weeks of its existence. Their **open aggressiveness** dated from the West [Burnham] resolution and the Shachtman-Swabeck support of it – in other words, from the same time when the disputed political issue was first definitely posed in the party. Furthermore, the party press from the outset had carried material implying approval and support of the French turn.

When Cannon and Shachtman advocated a cease-fire (“no discussion for six months”) on the acrimonious and confrontational atmosphere in the early Workers Party, precipitated largely by the Oehlerites and extending beyond entry to Bolshevization, this was dismissed by Muste as an unprincipled suppression of discussion.

The original sin, then, according to Muste, lay with the Cannon-Shachtman group, by both commission and omission. This translated, for Muste, into positions that seemed decidedly Oehlerite: “The S.P. is a reactionary force in the labor movement against which we must conduct an irreconcilable struggle on every front.” If splits occurred in this reformist body, Muste advocated working for a “further split or splits in which the incorrigible reformists and centrists

are differentiated from the elements genuinely moving toward a revolutionary marxian position and capable of being assimilated in the w.p. either as individuals or in small groups or as larger groups with which merger occurs.”¹⁵²

As the 4–9 October 1935 Plenum of the Workers Party approached, the *New Militant* bristled with a range of articles on strikes, unemployed agitations, the state of class relations in Roosevelt’s America, the international situation, and, most threateningly, the drive to war. Of particular interest to the Plenum, with its need to address the internal party situation and the Oehlerite opposition, were editorial board articles on the Socialist Party.¹⁵³ Cannon, back in political harness after his summer health hiatus in Connecticut, kicked off a four-part Irving Plaza sequence of speeches, revived his ‘dere Emily’ column that had run during the Minneapolis strikes in the pages of *The Organizer*, co-hosted and spoke at a New York banquet, where he and Muste lectured on the Workers Party and the Fourth International, and prepared a major address on Lenin and the Russian Revolution.¹⁵⁴ With the Oehlerites threatening to disrupt the Workers Party orientation to the Socialist Party by engaging in discussions with left wingers affiliated with the RPPA in the hopes of recruiting them directly to their WP faction, the Political Committee established a formal negotiating body instructed to handle all SP work, headed by Cannon and excluding Oehler and Stamm. A Control Commission was then established to look into the two opponents of the French turn and their conduct toward Socialist Party contacts, the findings of this investigation resulting in censure of Oehler and Stamm.¹⁵⁵

152 The above paragraphs draw on A.J. Muste, “How the Cannon-Shachtman Group ‘Builds’ the Party”; Muste, “Statement of Attitude of w.p. to s.p. and c.p.,” July 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers; Shachtman, “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 251–260.

153 “Confidential Report by O’Neal to 2nd International Reveals Situation in the Socialist Party of U.S.,” and “‘Militant’ Confab Proves Failure,” *New Militant*, 14 September 1935; “‘Militant Socialist’ Program Hedges on Question of War,” *New Militant*, 5 October 1935; “On s.p. ‘Militants’ Trade Union Stand,” *New Militant*, 12 October 1935; “Socialist Party and the Coming War,” *New Militant*, 26 October 1935.

154 “Cannon to Speak Sunday Night on ‘Lenin to Stalin,’” and “dere emily,” *New Militant*, 21 September 1935; “Packed House Hears Cannon Lecture in First of Series of 4,” and “The Party at Work: New York Banquet,” *New Militant*, 28 September 1935; James P. Cannon, “Long Live the Russian Revolution,” *New Militant*, 2 November 1935. On the Cannon ‘dere emily’ columns see Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers’ Strikes of 1934* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

155 Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 781, drawing on an interview with Stamm, New York, 13 April 1951.

At the Plenum itself Oehler and Stamm were routed. The Political Committee passed a series of resolutions on the internal party situation that rejected decisively the sectarianism of the factional group led by the two dissidents, denying its claimed right to establish a separate factional press. Muste, Glotzer, Abern, and Weber were, for the moment, back on side. The Plenum acknowledged the right of Oehlerites to present their positions in Workers Party internal bulletins, to be read by party members only, but denied them a wider publication outlet. In stern language and by unambiguous votes of 18–2, the Political Committee rejected Oehler's and Stamm's caricature of the French turn as "liquidationist" and condemned their denigration of ICL comrades who had entered the SFIO as "capitulators." The Oehlerites were also given "a final warning that further violations of discipline and acts of disruption and disloyalty to the party would not be tolerated."

Oehler was the sole National Committee dissenting voice against a document approved by the Plenum that reiterated the need for the Workers Party to develop a decisive orientation to the Socialist Party. In "Building the American Section of the Fourth International," the WP noted that with the "movement for organic unity" proposed by the Popular Frontist Stalinists, the appetite for "social reformism" in the United States enlarged. It threatened to ingest "the inchoate and unclear revolutionary tendencies in the SP under a wave of reformist unification." Equally dangerous was the possibility of the SP consolidating an "all-inclusive party" in which a general combination of Lovestoneites and other centrist currents would undermine the Workers Party and "divert to its side many of the radical workers" who could, potentially, be won to revolutionary politics. Cannon reported to the Workers Party's Political Committee meeting of 21 October 1935 that "[Will] Herberg of the Lovestoneites is negotiating to bring part of the Lovestoneites into the SP, SP Militants prepared to accept group provided [Charles] Zimmerman is included."¹⁵⁶

Oehler and Stamm struck back, the Workers Party declaring that, "A publication of the faction has been issued as a rival to the party press." This bulletin,

156 My thanks to Jacob Zumoff for drawing my attention to "Building the American Section of the Fourth International." Zumoff to Palmer, quoting "Building the American Section of the Fourth International," 18 July 2017. See also Minutes, Political Committee, 21 October 1935, Folder 11, PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee. See "Lovestone Gets His Price," *New Militant*, 23 November 1935; Alexander, *The Right Opposition*, 103, on this proposed Herberg/Zimmerman joining of the SP, with the Lovestoneite repudiation of the claim, *Workers Age*, 30 November 1935 insisting that such reports were distortions and lies, "clearly a case where Jim Cannon is indebted to the bottle for his inspiration and to an imbecile for his facts."

five numbers of which would appear, starting in September 1935, was entitled *For the Fourth International: International News*. Distributed by P. Handy of New York and declaring itself an organ of the Left Wing Group, Workers Party, USA, this Oehlerite publication drew immediate rebuke within the Political Committee. Muste issued a Workers Party circular to all branches condemning the open distribution of this factional publication. By the end of September the Political Committee was exhibiting signs of serious frustration with Oehlerite breaches of discipline, and was "united in its opposition." In addition, the anti-French turn opposition orchestrated an attack on WP positions at a public forum in New York on 20 October 1935, and followed this up with their own meeting the next week "devoted to slanderous attacks on the Workers Party." The *New Militant* declared that the Oehlerites "have left the Party." At a forum backing the French Bolsheviks "cries about the suppression of democracy in the W.P." were heard, but Cannon publicly rapped the Oehlerite forces, holding up as proof of the minority's rights to its views their articles in internal bulletins.

Not content with this freedom of expression, Oehler and Stamm led their faction in what was said to be a "voluntary walkout," an exit from "the organization despite the democracy proffered them by the party." At a Political Committee meeting of 28 October 1935, Muste moved five resolutions against Oehler, Stamm, and Basky, and the latter two dissidents, in attendance, walked out. Muste, as National Secretary, wrote to all Workers Party branches, stressing that Oehler, Stamm, and Basky had, in effect, split from the party. Loyal members who held Oehlerite views were advised they could express them in accordance with the recent Plenum's regulations, but collaboration with the trio who had left the organization, in the form of organizing meetings, distributing documents, and other such acts, was now prohibited. Oehler, Stamm, and Basky were suspended, their followers urged to remain in the Workers Party as loyal, disciplined comrades.

Trotsky noted that the Oehlerites seemed incapable of returning to the fold. The ICL leader was disturbed by their, "Sabotaging the party, remaining in contact with the people who have betrayed and the deserters, Bauer and Company, not submitting to discipline, circulating the vilest slanders about our international organization, about our French and Belgian sections, the Oehler group demands for itself ... democratic centralism, that is to say the right to sit in judgement over the overwhelming majority." He thought "expulsion of the Oehler group has become absolutely necessary." Cannon, always more earthy, wrote later that, with respect to the diseased sectarianism of the mid-1930s, "Surgical treatment followed only when the defeated Oehlerites began to violate party discipline systematically and to prepare a split. In the course of discussion and explanation, we educated the great majority of the party. The body

... had been cured and was in good health. The tip of the little finger remained infected and began to turn gangrenous, so we just chopped it off."¹⁵⁷

Oehler and Stamm formed the Revolutionary Workers League [RWL], an organization destined to bear the fruits of sectarianism in future splits, one of which saw Stamm decamp to lead the Revolt Group. Discussions inside the Workers Party's Political Committee stressed, complacently, that Oehlerite defections were hardly debilitating, with Chicago, where 15 departed the WP, and New York the most severely affected. There was apparently minimal impact elsewhere, with only one member taking leave on the West Coast.¹⁵⁸ Still, with their initial numbers estimated at a perhaps exaggerated 200, the RWL drained a significant group of Workers Party militants away from Cannon and the entryist project, including the Non-Partisan Labor Defense activist duo of Herbert Solow and John McDonald. Drawing on membership figures provided by George Breitman, Alan Wald estimated that the varied oppositions and splits of 1934–36, of which the departure of Oehler and his followers was arguably the most important, resulted in the Workers Party ranks, which stood at roughly 700 after the CLA-AWP fusion, dropping to between 500–600 on the eve of entry into the Socialist Party.¹⁵⁹ In Chicago, Al Goldman heralded

157 The above paragraphs draw upon A.J. Muste, "To Branches: International News," 6 September 1935; Workers Party, Minutes, Political Committee, 16 September 1935; 30 September 1935, Folder 10; Workers Party, Minutes, Political Committee, 28 October 1935, Folder 11; Workers Party, Resolutions Adopted at PC Plenum, October 1935, Folder 12; all in PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee; A.J. Muste for the Political Committee, To All Branches of the Workers Party, 29 October 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers; "Plenum Meets; Plans a Campaign Against War," *New Militant*, 19 October 1934; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 197, 214–215; Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 780–781; Myers, *The Prophet's Army*, 116–118; "Statement of National Committee of the Workers Party of New York," *New Militant*, 2 November 1935; "700 at New York Meeting Back French Bolsheviks," *New Militant*, 9 November 1935; Allen and Breitman, eds., *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1935–1936]*, 193–194.

158 Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 781–783; Sidney Lens, *Unrepentant Radical: An American Activist's Account of Five Turbulent Decades* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), 43–84; Daniel Bell, "The Background and Development of Marxian Socialism in the United States," in Donald Drew Egbert and Stow Persons, eds., *Socialism and American Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), 367–368. There is an illuminating cache of RWL documents and leaflets, revealing the Oehlerite positions on entry, armed insurrection, internationalism and other questions in Roll 13, Reel 3356, MS Papers. For an assessment of the impact of Oehlerite defections see Workers Party, Minutes, Political Committee, 11 November 1935, Folder 13, PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee.

159 On Solow, McDonald, and Oehler, and membership figures, see Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 106–110; Lens, *Unrepentant Radical*, 42–44. Note, as well, on membership Paul Le Blanc, "Trotskyism in the United States: The First Fifty Years," in George Breitman, Paul Le Blanc, and Alan Wald, *Trotskyism in the United States: Historical Essays and Reconsid-*

the Oehler split as the last gasp of a die-hard sectarian resistance to Trotsky's French turn, "one of the boldest and most brilliant maneuvers in revolutionary strategy." He praised the realistic approach of Cannon, which recognized the leftward movement inside the Socialist Party, and judged the sweeping aside of Oehlerite sectarianism an inevitable growth pain for the revolutionary movement.¹⁶⁰

For their part, the Oehlerites insisted that the French Turn was liquidationist and that "organic unity" was the derailing of the revolutionary left. They saw the United States working class as over-ripe for the politics of an independent Left Wing oriented to the creation of a Fourth International. A Chicago-based Oehlerite youth publication, *Call to Action*, stated the case for opposing the Socialist Party entry and, indeed, breaking from Trotsky's changed orientation to the Communist International:

In the United States, the possibility of building an independent party, section of the Fourth International, was greater than in any other country: a weak and discredited SP and CP, and a militant working class almost untouched by the two 'radical' parties. But the virus of the international turn had already entered the body of the WP, brought in by the Cannon-Shachtman group. The American translation of this turn is the orientation of the WP to the SP. [Resolutions] proposing fusion with the 'left wing' of the SP, even if we have to become the 'official SP,' the absence of any political campaign against the SP, ... the abandonment of work in the CP and the theory that the CP is impenetrable, tail-endism to the SP in ... demonstrations, as well as in the fields of unemployed, trade union, and labor defense work, the liquidation of important departments of the party – all this is the balance sheet of the Socialist Party orientation applied in practice.

erations (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), 72. Solow's embrace of Oehler's critique of entry no doubt turned in part on his view that the NPLD was making undue concessions to the Socialist Party's soft-peddling of the need to vigorously and militantly resist the violence of capitalist assault upon and victimization of class war advocates. He also believed that with entry the NPLD would be wound down, which in fact happened with the creation of another body, the Workers Defense League. In time, Solow would come to work again with Trotskyists, especially around the Committee to Defend Leon Trotsky and the campaign to discredit the Moscow Trials.

160 [Al Goldman], "Workers' Party Splits," *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (November – December 1935), 8.

To achieve this political adjustment, moreover, the majority of the Workers Party was condemned for introducing a “regime of bureaucracy and back-stage maneuvering in the best Stalinist style.” Opportunism required such methods in its “fight against Marxism.” Political paralysis resulted in a “failure to react to world events, as well as a cowardly refusal to take a position on the fundamental problems of the American revolution.” Claims to internationalism foundered on the shoals of inattention to world historic events: “the Cuban revolution and the Chilean insurrectionary situation went without the party reacting to it.” In the United States programmatic issues of importance went unaddressed: “The Negro, colonial, agrarian, trade union questions, as well as a dozen others, remain unsolved by the Party as events pass over its head.”¹⁶¹

Inside the Workers Party things no doubt looked different. With Shachtman on a national tour from 15 October to 15 December 1935,¹⁶² Cannon, in alliance with Swabeck and youth leader, Joseph Carter, was largely responsible for handling relations with the Socialist Party left wing, and preparing for the scheduled December National Conference of the Workers Party. Trotsky did his best to mollify and neutralize Muste, writing to him that a sharp attack on Oehler had been required.¹⁶³ Cannon and Shachtman made their case for the necessity of entry in a detailed seven-page 4 January 1936 letter to Trotsky:

Firstly: the movement in the SP is distinctly to the Left and if we can inoculate it against Centrism in general and Stalinism in particular, it will develop – if not all of the members, then at any rate thousands of them – all the way to consistent Marxism. Secondly: we have skilled and trained forces at our disposal capable of organizing a serious fight within the SP, for our tendency; our work of seven years of hardening Bolshevik cadres, on top of the previous experience of the leadership, has not been lost work; without exaggeration, we can say that the forces of the American section of the Fourth International can easily take care of themselves in the SP. Thirdly: compared with the European parties, the American SP (with the “Old Guard” out) has a small and weak bureaucracy, composed of unskilled politicians (the most able ones are in the split-off Right

161 The above paragraphs quote from “Statement of the Left Wing of the Spartacus Youth League to the New York District Convention,” *Call to Action*, 1 (November 1935), 2–3.

162 “Shachtman on National Tour,” *New Militant*, 5 October 1935; “Hundreds Turn Out for Shachtman Meeting: Chicago, Detroit, and Northwest High Points of Tour,” *New Militant*, 9 November 1935; “Shachtman Gets Rousing Reception in Minneapolis, Plentywood Meetings,” *New Militant*, 16 November 1935; “500 in New York Hear Max Shachtman; Cannon to Speak on Labor Wars in Minneapolis, Jan. 5th,” *New Militant*, 28 December 1935.

163 Trotsky to Muste, 18 September 1935, Roll 3, Reel 3346, MS Papers.

wing) who have none of the abilities and experiences of the German, French, Czech or British reformists. Fourthly: our Party – not so much as an organization – but as a banner, as a system of ideas, as a tradition, as an aggregation of known and experienced revolutionists, enjoys a considerable prestige and respect among the SP and YPSL membership. (Widespread among them is this argument: ‘Why don’t you comrades come into the SP? We need experienced people like you. With your ability you could become the leaders of the movement!’ Important here is not the formula or the exaggerations, but the attitude.)¹⁶⁴

It was evident as 1936 opened that the inner-party situation within American social democracy was particularly volatile, redefining, for Cannon, the nature of the WP’s relation to the Socialist Party and putting the timing and meaning of a Workers Party convention on a different political plane than had been the case in mid-1935.

10 Socialist Party Schisms and Workers Party Entry

Inside the Socialist Party Militants and the Old Guard clashed repeatedly. As a split appeared imminent, left wingers in the Revolutionary Policy Publication Association were in touch with Cannon and others in the Workers Party leadership. At the same time, the Communist Party moved decisively into an embrace of the Popular Front, appealing for unity with the Socialists around anti-war mobilizations, trade union struggles, and agitations among youth and the jobless. This opened the door to Workers Party interventions in various spheres of collaborative work, but it also threatened the weaker Trotskyist forces with being swept aside in a Stalinist-Socialist collaborative tide that would ultimately have to come to grief on the shoals of political differentiation. The *New Militant* was consequently awash with articles addressing developments inside the Socialist Party: discussions of debates between the American leaders of communism and social democracy, Earl Browder and Norman Thomas, were featured; accounts of the ongoing drive to industrial unionism, still strong in the AFL unions, but now breaking out increasingly in the organization of independent labor bodies and in the nascent CIO, were prominent.¹⁶⁵

164 Cannon and Shachtman to Trotsky, 4 January 1936, “International Files,” General Correspondence, 1931–1963, Box 20, Files 1–9/Reel 26, JPC Papers.

165 “Old Guard Reorganizes NY Socialist Party,” *New Militant*, 23 November 1935; “Thomas Leads Break with Old Guard as NY Socialist Party Splits,” and Art Preis, “Yipsels United

A February 1936 dual headline of the *New Militant* – “Japanese Invasion Threatens Soviet Union” and “Massed Goodyear Pickets Throw Back Police Army for First Major Victory in Rubber Strike” – captured something of Workers Party concerns during this difficult period.¹⁶⁶ As Hitler’s war drive accelerated, the militant stand of the GBL entryists in the SFIO was presented regularly in the American Trotskyist press.¹⁶⁷ In all of this Cannon, Shachtman, Swabeck, and Trotsky were routinely featured in the Workers Party press. Trotsky opposed adaptation to Stalinism’s Popular Front with a dual critique of sectarianism and centrism, making a case for building the Fourth International.¹⁶⁸

with Spartacus at Toledo Meet,” *New Militant*, 14 December 1935; Arne Swabeck, “The Significance of the Browder-Thomas Debate for the Revolutionary Movement,” *New Militant*, 21 December 1935; “The League of Stalinist Agents for Social Patriotism: A Political Analysis of the Lovestone Group and its Reactionary Role,” *New Militant*, 4 January 1936; “Utica Conference of ‘Militants’ Deepens Rupture in Socialist Party,” *New Militant*, 4 January 1936; “NEC Suspends NY Old Guard as Socialist Party Split Widens,” and Max Shachtman, “‘People’s Front’ New Panacea of Stalinism,” *New Militant*, 11 January 1936; Arne Swabeck, “Will the AFL Split on the Issue of Industrial Unionism,” *New Militant*, 1 February 1936; “Minneapolis Unions Join Lewis Set-Up,” *New Militant*, 15 February 1936; “Social Patriotism Routed in Debate Between YCL-YPSL on War Question,” *New Militant*, 22 February 1936; Max Shachtman, “A Dubious Ally for Stalinism: How the ‘Old Guard’ Becomes a ‘Friend of the Soviet Union,’” and “Jobless Unite in Nationwide Army at Great Washington DC Congress Meeting on April 7–10,” *New Militant*, 4 April 1936; “Launch United Unemployed Association,” *New Militant*, 11 April 1936; John West, “The Old Guard and the SP Primaries,” and A.J. Muste, “Analysis of the Akron Strike and the CIO,” *New Militant*, 18 April 1936; Max Shachtman, “Jobless Masses Unite Ranks,” *New Militant*, 18 April 1936; Shachtman, “Browder: The Man and His Book, 2: The Wooing of the Socialist Party,” and Swabeck, “CIO Faces Challenge of Steel,” *New Militant*, 16 May 1936; Frank A. Warren, *An Alternative Vision: The Socialist Party in the 1930s* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1974), 4. See also “From Our Viewpoint: Old Guard Determined to Split Party on a National Scale,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (January – February 1936), 1–2, 8.

166 “Japanese Invasion Threatens Soviet Union,” and “Massed Goodyear Pickets Throw Back Police Army for First Major Victory in Rubber Strike,” *New Militant*, 29 February 1936.

167 “People’s Front Cracks in Crisis: Fred Zeller Declares for 4th International,” *New Militant*, 30 November 1935; “War Policy Causes Clash in Student Unity Conference: Resolution Adopted Ambiguous on Crucial Question of Soviet Union; SYL and Yipsel Members Fight Stalinist Social Patriotism,” *New Militant*, 4 January 1936; “Jail French Bolsheviks in Class Fight,” *New Militant*, 7 March 1936; “Call for Revolutionary Mass Action in France,” *New Militant*, 28 March 1936; “French Gov’t Jails Zeller, Youth Leader,” *New Militant*, 4 April 1936; “Radicals Hold Whip Hand in French People’s Front,” and John West, “The Meaning of the French Elections,” *New Militant*, 9 May 1936.

168 See, for instance, Leon Trotsky, “Committees of Action – Not People’s Front,” *New Militant*, 14 December 1935; Trotsky, “Sectarianism, Centrism, and the Fourth International,” *New Militant*, 4 January 1936.

Cannon's particular approach was more hands-on. He traveled to Austin, Minnesota at the invitation of the Northwest Labor Unity Conference, speaking to 40 delegates seeking amalgamation of the progressive industrial union forces within the AFL with newly-mobilized independent labor organizations. As class conflict erupted again in Minneapolis, he was on hand, spending time in the Twin Cities, and shoring up his embattled comrades, the leadership of the Local Drivers' Union 574, Vincent Ray Dunne, Miles Dunne, Farrell Dobbs, Carl Skoglund, and Harry DeBoer. Local 574 and its Trotskyist leadership were scapegoated in a national AFL campaign, headed by William Green and aiming to purge the conservative labor movement of "dangerous reds." This coincided with Dan Tobin's longstanding animosity to the Trotskyist teamsters. The Minneapolis Drivers' Union faced a pogrom-like assault: its local charter was revoked, and 574 was purged, in a narrow and hotly contested vote, from the Central Labor Union [CLU]. Still, Dunne, Dobbs, and other Cannon loyalists continued to organize. In the pages of the *New Militant*, Cannon wrote that Local 574 was invincible, "a mass movement, drawing the people ever closer to the union, taking hold of them at their work and in their hours of recreation, wielding them together." Nothing less than a "formidable movement," Local 574 was now "outlawed," in the formal sense, the trade union tops rescinding its credentials and exiling it from their officially-sanctioned local deliberations. But the union was anything but busted, Cannon insisting that it was "the pride of the whole Northwest, strong in the affection of the working masses." The greatest advantage of the union, and what made it such an important target for the red-baiting labor bureaucracy, was that Local 574 never abandoned its class struggle origins. It supported the strikes of other unions wholeheartedly and, in turn, "the rank and file of the other unions rally around it." Having done what he could to lift the spirits and embolden the perspectives of Local 574's Trotskyist leadership, Cannon returned to New York to lecture on the ongoing labor wars in Minneapolis, and write a lengthy article for the *New Militant* on the legacies of Lenin.¹⁶⁹

169 James P. Cannon, "The Future of the AFL: From a Speech Delivered by Comrade James P. Cannon Before a Forum of Minneapolis Workers," *New Militant*, 14 December 1935; "N.West Militants Meet: Seeks Link with AFL Industrial Unionists; Cannon Speaks," *New Militant*, 21 December 1935; "500 in NY Hear Shachtman, Cannon to Speak on Labor War in Minneapolis, Jan. 5th," *New Militant*, 28 December 1935; James P. Cannon, "Under the Banner of Lenin," *New Militant*, 18 January 1936. On the ongoing class struggles in Minneapolis, where a drawn-out strike at the Strutwear plant, commencing in August 1935, figured prominently, see Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 116-122; "Iron Workers Victorious in Minneapolis: 74 Day Battle

There also, trouble was brewing. Cannon, those around him in the New York offices of the Workers Party leadership, and militants in the activist field, thought the new organization handicapped in its “looking inward, instead of forcing ourselves out from isolation.” From the Toledo Workers School, Bert [Burke] Cochran and a trio of former Musteites, Ted Selander, Sam Pollack, and Art Preis wrote to the Political Committee in New York that, ever since the October Plenum, when positive resolutions had been passed, “No concerted pressure has, to our knowledge, been exerted on the sp.” They were particularly concerned that the amalgamation of unemployed organizations – the Workers Party’s National Unemployed League, the Socialist Party’s Workers Alliance of America [WAA], and the Communist Party’s National Unemployed Council – was unfolding with little indication that the fused ranks of the AWP and the CLA were doing anything. “[W]hile we are sleeping,” they noted, “the CP is busy. ... our relations with the SP members here in Toledo have grown considerably cooler. **This process, if repeated on a political scale, will be a calamity to our party and its rapid growth!**”¹⁷⁰

These kinds of concerns surfaced with a vengeance in Allentown, Pennsylvania, a former stronghold of AWP activism, where the Musteite National Unemployed League was particularly vibrant. Concern had been voiced as early as the summer of 1935 that Workers Party leaders like the African American jobless activist, Ernest Rice McKinney, were sharing podiums with Louis Budenz, clearly disaffected with the fusion of the League and the AWP, and on his way

in Which Two Were Killed Comes to an End,” *New Militant*, 5 October 1935; “15 Unions for Recharter of Drivers’ 574,” *New Militant*, 12 October 1935; A.J. Muste, “Green-Woll Forces Suffer Heavy Setback at AFL Convention,” *New Militant*, 19 October 1935; A.J. Muste, “Build the Left Wing Is Real Lesson of AFL Convention,” *New Militant*, 26 October 1935; “Green Trains Guns on Militant Minneapolis Labor; Appeals to Open Shoppery Against Local 574; 574’s Fighting Policy ...,” *New Militant*, 2 November 1935; “Minneapolis Progressives Rally for Defense of Drivers Local 574: Issue Challenge to Nation’s Militants to Hit Green Drive,” *New Militant*, 9 November 1935; “Minneapolis Labor Slams Union-Busting Campaign,” *New Militant*, 16 November 1935; “Stormy CLU Rally in Minneapolis Voices Protest,” *New Militant*, 23 November 1935; James P. Cannon, “Local 574 is Invincible,” *New Militant*, 30 November 1935; “Russell Sentenced to Four Months in Hosiery Strike Case,” *New Militant*, 28 December 1935; “Olson Calls Out Militia in Strutwear Hosiery Strike in Minneapolis,” *New Militant*, 4 January 1936. See also, A.J. Muste To All Branches of the WP, “Mobilize to Support Minneapolis,” no date [November 1935]; “The Minneapolis Labor Movement: The Facts,” no date, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers; Workers Party, Minutes, Political Committee, 4 November 1935; 11 November 1935; A.J. Muste, “Mobilize to Support Minneapolis,” [no date, November 1935?], Folder 13, PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee.

170 Burnham to Comrades, 5 December 1935, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Cochran, Selander, Pollack, and Preis to Comrades, 4 January 1936, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers.

to joining the Communist Party in October 1935. Another Musteite leader of the unemployed, Arnold Johnson, joined the CP and Cannon suspected that "there was always a taint of Stalinist ideology in the position of the Allentown comrades." Allegations of breaches of discipline and improper relations with Stalinists resulted in some of the leadership in the Pennsylvania branch being suspended, but the local refused to acknowledge the disciplinary measures. Cannon himself spoke in Allentown in early November 1935, his public forum on "War and the Workers" notable for a clash with Communist Party stalwarts over the Third Period's sectarian betrayal of united front opposition to Hitler's rise and the resulting drive to international hostilities. Making "short shrift of the Stalinist flunkies," Cannon then offered the Comintern advocates an open debate before the Allentown working class, with equal time for both sides, but his proposal found no takers. Sam Gordon and Anthony Ramuglia were dispatched to Allentown, where a McKinney-Muste aligned group accused Cannon of "attempting in a mechanical and dictatorial fashion to impose a Gordon-Ramuglia leadership on the Allentown workers." Muste offered the rebel branch a certain measure of political protection, with Cannon's view being that this constituted cover for Stalinist maneuvers.¹⁷¹

What was also at stake, however, was the Muste-Weber group's ongoing Oehler-like opposition to the French turn. The unemployed movement in Allentown constituted something of a pilot project associated with the entryist tactic and the Socialist Party. Discussions around "unity" in the unemployed movement were at a fragile negotiating juncture. By the end of 1935, the Popular Front Communist Party had the position that it was willing to merge its Unemployed Councils with the Socialist Party's jobless mobilization, the Workers Alliance of America [WAA], without consideration of key posts or other matters of organizational prestige. The WAA, its militants willing to go along with much of the political direction of the Workers Party and the NUL within which the fusion of the CLA-AWP exercised considerable influence, was nonetheless resistant to conceding much in the way of organizational authority. In this context, Ramuglia favored unity with the WAA, even if some of the terms were unfavorable, rather than exclusion and marginalization, which the Stalinists were undoubtedly jockeying for in clandestine ways. The entry thus entailed suppression of the National Unemployed League's identity, but the

¹⁷¹ Shachtman to Cannon, 13 July 1935 [?]; Burhnam to Comrades, 5 December 1935, Reel 3, JPC Papers; "100 Hear Cannon in Allentown," *New Militant*, 16 November 1935; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 229–231. The development of the Allentown crisis is revealed in a series of Workers Party Secretariat documents: A.J. Muste, "Resolution on the Allentown Situation," 28 October 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers.

possibility of expanding greatly the nature of the jobless mobilization and the Workers Party's capacity to reach a much wider mass constituency. Ramuglia was adamant that "no pretext offers itself for hesitation": the new unified unemployed movement was to be a "rank and file, democratic" body with a "militant class struggle program." Cognizant that the National Unemployed League in Allentown was in favor of unity, and that both the CP and the SP had forces inside the local movement that would play up the rank-and-file desire for unity and pillory those who blocked it, Ramuglia stressed that the only reasonable course to follow was to merge with the WAA, even if the Socialist Party leadership imposed limiting conditions of an organizational kind. "I do not predicate my position for acceptance of the terms offered us upon despair, or a defeatist position," concluded the old Musteite turned Cannonist, "but upon a positive position. Our policies can be made to prevail in the new organization. Our people will rise to leadership. We are far from hamstrung." Insisting that the control of the WAA was more "nominal than actual," the President of the National Unemployed League believed that "refusals to go through with this merger would be a sectarian crime and a blow to our party."

McKinney and Arnold Johnson had exactly the opposite position, standing firm in demanding that if unity in the mobilization of the unemployed was to take place it must be on the basis of a "genuine unification and fusion of forces" premised on a parity arrangement. In the absence of such unification, argued McKinney-Johnson, the National Unemployed League must retain its independence and "work along lines previously laid down," holding its own Convention in the spring, and continuing to agitate for unity by methods outlined in the past. In the end, the Ramuglia proposal was approved in the Political Committee, but Muste's support for McKinney-Johnson suggested a hardening factional position on the Americanization of the French turn.¹⁷²

172 The above paragraphs draw on Burnham to Comrades, 5 December 1935, Reel 3 JPC Papers; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 229–231; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 119–120; "Statement by Ramuglia on WAA-NUL Negotiations, 6 January 1936," and "Johnson-McKinney Statement," in Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 8 January 1936, Box 42, Folder 12, GB Papers, originally read in uncatalogued George Breitman Papers, New York, in folder labeled "Workers Party, 1934–1936." See also Cannon to Ted Selander, 9 January 1936, "The NUL-WAA Unity Negotiations," Box 49, Folder 7, "Cannon Correspondence, Houghton Library," GB Papers. On Allentown's importance see also Lester Heckman, "Striker Tells of WPA Victory in Allentown," *New Militant*, 26 October 1935 and for ongoing tensions related to the struggle for unity in the unemployed movement, Muste's relations with Arnold Johnson, and other related matters see Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 30 January 1936; 18 March 1936; 23 March 1936; Workers Party, National Committee, Minutes, 3 March 1936; 4 March 1936, Box 42, Folder 12, GB Papers; Workers Party, Minutes, Political Committee, 11 November 1935, Folder 13; Minutes, Political Committee, 23 December 1935;

Cannon was known, after a hard factional fight such as had been conducted with Oehler in 1935, to sometimes dig in further. It was an understandable reaction in someone who had seen political movements stopped dead in their tracks by unrelenting factional warfare. Having dispensed with the Oehlerite sectarians, Cannon could not have been pleased when confronted with evidence that there remained within the Workers Party a loose contingent of opponents, whose political coherence was questionable but who seemed always aligned in opposition to the Americanization of the French turn and who were definitely united in their complaints about his "regime." As 1935 gave way to 1936, dissent within the Workers Party became concentrated in a clique-like faction associated with Muste, Weber, and Abern, with the former hardening in his opposition to discussions of entering a Socialist Party clearly in the throes of political reconfiguration, and the latter two figures recycling claims of the Cannon group's intransigence and bureaucratic high-handedness. Cannon's inclination was to strike back, settling decisively the political questions, ending the ongoing nagging that he genuinely believed was an impediment to the advancing revolutionary movement. This combative instinct was not perhaps his finest trait and Trotsky, more than once, cautioned Cannon not to act precipitously in his recourse to definitive, organizational resolutions of problems that were best settled in patient, if trying, political dialogue, clarification, and, hopefully, reconciliation.¹⁷³

Cannon and his supporters in the New York leadership of the Workers Party agreed, in early-to-mid November 1935 that, the Oehler issue settled, "our immediate perspective must be peace in the party, no head-on fight to be initiated by us." When in Minneapolis in November – December 1935, however, Cannon apparently began to think differently. At "an informal conference ... with the leading comrades," most notably fellow NC members, Vincent Ray Dunne and Carl Skoglund, Cannon concluded that it was imperative the Workers Party make "a sharp political turn." This entailed an invigorated push to carry out the French turn in the United States, entering the Socialist Party. For this to be done, however, it was necessary to arrive at a rather abrupt decision to delay the Workers Party's second annual conference, scheduled for December 1935.

27 December 1935; 29 December 1935, Folder 14; Minutes, Political Committee, 8 January 1936, Folder 15, PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee.

¹⁷³ Note the later, September – October 1937 communications of Trotsky to Cannon, advising him to do his utmost to "eliminate any bureaucratic tendency and amplify the general party democracy," initiatives which had to "issue from the 'majority' which can only by general good will disarm the minority." Trotsky to Cannon, 11 September 1937; 3 October 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 439–431, 475–478.

Such a postponement would allow time to win over, neutralize, or defeat various political opponents, Muste among them. Undoubtedly the precipitating factor in this decision was the volatile situation in the Socialist Party. A reluctant voice of the Militants, Norman Thomas, had just debated Communist Party head, Earl Browder, the event raising thousands of dollars for the cash-starved Socialists. But it also unleashed a vicious denunciation of the exchange, the SP's conservative Old Guard putting on a display of anti-communist bigotry, claiming that the debate constituted a "united front." Browder, happy to drive the wedge of political differentiation deeply into the ranks of the fractured social democratic party, would soon present the Trojan Horse of "organic unity" to Thomas and the Socialists, offering to run a 1936 Presidential ticket of Browder-Thomas, a proposal the Socialist Party head turned down. In the actual debate, Thomas largely staked out political ground to the left of Browder and the Communist Party, further indicating to Cannon and others around him in the Workers Party that the time was ripe to enter the Socialists, both to win to the Fourth International needed recruits from the SP youth and left wing, where interest in Revolution was rampant but untutored, and to keep Stalinism or the Lovestone group from reaping the benefits of the Socialist Party's obviously accelerating political implosion.

Cannon, Skoglund, and Dunne dashed off a lengthy letter to the New York-based WP Political Committee on 30 November 1935. It requested a delay of the second annual convention until April, rationalizing this request on the grounds that the Minneapolis comrades could not absent themselves from ongoing struggles amid the AFL-IBT officialdom's local red scare, and upping the ante with a provocative allusion to New York branches harboring an unprincipled factionalism that needed to be brought out into the open. Rescheduling of the convention was thus "ABSOLUTELY IMPERATIVE," so that a Workers Party discussion could "really clarify the issues and a party convention ... consciously decide them."¹⁷⁴

Such a move was destined to alienate Muste, as well as Weber and Abern, but it also irked Burnham and Swabeck, who were perplexed as to why the fac-

¹⁷⁴ On the Socialist Party split see Seidler, *Norman Thomas*, 154–161; Fleischman, *Norman Thomas*, 168–170; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 220–223; M.S. Venkataramani, "Leon Trotsky's Adventure in American Radical Politics, 1935–1937," *International Review of Social History*, 9 (April 1964), 4–7; Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 188–192. On the Browder-Thomas debate, see also Arne Swabeck, "The Significance of the Browder-Thomas Debate For the Revolutionary Movement," *New Militant*, 21 December 1935. Quotes from Burnham to Comrades, 5 December 1935, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Cannon, Dunne, Skoglund to Political Committee, 30 November 1935, attached to A.J. Muste, Workers Party US to All Branches, 3 January 1936, Box 42, Folder 12, GB Papers.

tional fight, which could now not be avoided, had to be brought out into the open at this time. They clearly did not grasp what Cannon and his close allies in Minneapolis appreciated: as long as the “Old Guard” of the Socialist Party, ensconced in the party apparatus of sinecures in New York, dominated the organization, any possibility of Trotskyist entry would be blocked by the right wing. With a December 1935 challenge to the “Old Guard” mounted by New York “Militants,” the conservative SP officialdom responded with heavy-handed measures, expelling and reorganizing some “Left-Wing” branches, precipitating an organizational rupture that Cannon viewed as heralding “the national split.” This opened the door, as Cannon, Dunne, Skoglund, and others appreciated, to the possibility of a Workers Party entry. In the context of their immediate battles with the right wing, the SP “Militants” opportunistically supported this proposed influx of left-wing Trotskyists. The “Old Guard,” increasingly isolated and likely to be find themselves following the logic of their political trajectory of support for Roosevelt and his 1936 electoral aspirations, would have little credibility in opposing such an entry. But if this Workers Party shift into the Socialist Party was to happen, it had to proceed both quickly and on the basis of a thorough discussion among the WP membership, where Cannon appreciated that there would be opposition. Cannon perhaps failed to adequately explain the logic behind his sense of urgency to his Political Committee members, pushing resolutely for a change in the date of the scheduled WP Convention, thus allowing time for the membership to address the new situation in the SP and assess its meaning for a possible American variant of the French turn. The politics of this organizational reorientation, unfortunately, came to be relegated to the immediate background as acrimony arose over the proposal from Cannon and the Minneapolis branch to delay the Party Convention.¹⁷⁵

Burnham thought the move ill-advised because the new confrontation was poorly timed, would be perceived as being purely internal and leading to demoralization, and could not be waged on the same clear, principled grounds as the contest with the Oehlerites: “The Oehlerites held a tough, hard, consistent position against which direct blows could be made with the assurance that these blows would come up against something. Here, however, we have an unstable grouping which combines various forms of sectarianism with centrism and provincialism. A direct blow often comes up against mush or water –

¹⁷⁵ The extent to which entry’s prospects changed with the December 1935 split of the New York “Militants” and “Old Guard” is discussed in Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 217–224. On the Convention and its delay see also Workers Party, Minutes, Political Committee, 3 December 1935; 30 December 1935, Folder 14, PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee.

there isn't the same tough meat to get your teeth into." Both Burnham and Swabeck were insistent that the internal party situation – now complicated by a small factional formation around an AWP militant, Larry Cohen, known as the "Marxist Action Group" – was anything but sufficiently clarified to warrant Cannon's declaration of an out-and-out factional fight. The Cohen group was issuing Oehlerite-like broadsides insisting that the Workers Party be kept "pure," criticizing those who would "drag it through the swamp" of a centrist/reformist Socialist Party. Swabeck agreed that the Weberites "send letters, loads of them spreading rumors, suspicions, etc.," and he concurred that Muste must be separated from such methods and those who practiced them, but he was unambiguously of the view that "our immediate perspective must be peace in the party." As the leader of the majority within the Workers Party, finally, Cannon had certain responsibilities that Swabeck thought him shirking, going so far as to quote Trotsky's admonition, written amid the factional imbroglio of the early 1930s: "The oppositional minority has a certain right to manifest impatience, but the leading majority in no case." Burnham pointed out that the price to be paid for being perceived as provoking a fight could only confirm the views of the malcontents, making it seem that the Cannon group violated "the October Plenum agreement" and, as would be charged, were guilty of "‘bureaucratically’ crushing the political life of any tendency except our own."¹⁷⁶

Cannon's request to postpone the Workers Party conference was partially successful, the meeting being rescheduled to take place at the end of February/beginning of March 1936.¹⁷⁷ This precipitated a small flurry of December 1935 oppositional correspondence to District and National committees. From Columbus, Ohio came a particularly vehement condemnation of the Cannon-Shachtman leadership, castigated as "liquidationist" and calling for an emergency pre-Conference, to assemble 15 February 1936 "to fight for the establishment of a real center of revolutionary unity." Advocating the removal of a leadership that "spends its time waiting for the most opportune moment to bring entry into the S.P.," this widely-circulated document, apparently sent to all Workers Party members, indicated that a factional fight was on, and it hailed Muste as heading a political contingent, counter-posed to the capitulationist Cannonites: "The Muste group may be characterized as a real asset to the Party, in the example it sets of hard serious, unremitting work and in the splendid capacity of bringing order out of chaos, in its comradely approach to the

176 Burnham to Comrades, 5 December 1935; Swabeck to Cannon, no date, Sunday night [December 1935], Reel 3, JPC Papers; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 118–119.

177 A.J. Muste to All Branches, 3 January 1936, attached to Workers Party, Minutes, Political Committee, 8 January 1936, PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee.

members of the Party, in its ability to cooperate with comrades and branches throughout the country, and to pay minute attention to the branches. In our opinion this group, at this time, is the only group that has the possibility of offering positive opposition to the Cannon-Shachtman leadership.”¹⁷⁸

All of this came to a head because Cannon now took an unambiguous stand on entering the Socialist Party. In a lengthy, six-page 6 January 1936 circular, sent to all Workers Party groups aligned with him, Cannon outlined the necessity of getting into the Socialist Party immediately. In his view, developments in the SP and outside of it had now changed the political terrain on which American revolutionaries struggled. To secure what benefits could be had from the fragmentation of the centrist SP and preclude the drift to popular frontist “organic unity” that would align Stalinists, Lovestoneites, and various layers of the Socialist Party, including ostensible leftists, the Workers Party had to shift gears organizationally. If his judgement was sometimes clouded by optimism, as in his suggestion that a Trotskyist entry into the SP would necessarily be allowed to keep its press, Cannon nonetheless sensed correctly that it was the youth in the YPSL who would most likely be drawn to revolutionary politics, standing “far to the left of the adult party,” and constituting “an especially fertile field” for propaganda. Indeed, as Cannon reported to Trotsky, the YPSL was “perhaps the most important aspect of the whole problem, because I consider it feasible and practical to aim at the **conquest** of this organization for our cause. ... What is required is that our leading group of the youth gain direct access to the organization through entry.” Many of these Socialist Party young leftists were already quite close to the Workers Party and its positions. They exhibited a healthy attraction to revolutionary ideas that distinguished them from centrists, Old Guard conservatives in the social democratic officialdom, and Stalinists. Many YPSLs yearned to translate thought into action, this impulse being largely thwarted as they became entangled in the vacillation defining their lives inside a fundamentally reformist political formation. To reach these young militants and other genuine leftists in the SP, and to offer an alternative to various non-revolutionary currents, Cannon insisted that it was necessary for

178 Note the small flurry of factionally orchestrated condemnation of the Political Committee's decision to delay, evidence of Abern's and Weber's influence and addressing allegations of “Cannonite intimidation,” countered as false. See Joe Hansen (Salt Lake City) to District Committee, San Francisco, 8 December 1935; Reba Hansen to A.J. Muste, 8 December 1935; Charles Curtiss to Salt Lake Branch, 10 December 1935; Columbus Branch to The Workers Party of the US, The Political Committee, and the National Committee, 15 December 1935 [?], Curtiss to Lewit, 26 December 1935, with attachments from Bill Monroe, Ray Sparrow, Sam Meyers, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers.

the Workers Party to now take the leap into entrism, accelerating the timetable of actually joining the Socialist Party.

The **movement** for organic unity, supplemented by united fronts and socialist-Stalinist co-operation in special actions is already a reality. The 'reasonableness' of the Stalinists with their new line appeals more and more to the Right-centrists in the SP and even impresses many of the so-called lefts. There is a growing tendency to 'unite', to 'get everybody together', to 'do something' before fascism catches up with us. Along with this grows the tendency to compromise, to blur over differences, and to push aside the critical Workers Party as 'sectarian', a 'splinter group', etc. Unless we alter our tactics in the new situation and get inside the SP in **direct contact** with the left socialists we will not be able to influence them decisively in the next period; the organic unity campaign will swallow them up and leave us on the sidelines.

If Stalinism was, for Cannon, "the greatest danger to the left socialist movement," he also feared that it could well be complemented by a Lovestoneite initiative. For all of their seeming incompetence and lack of successful interventions in and influence over the Socialist Party, the Lovestone Right Opposition might well soon play a negative role in the unravelling of socialist centrism:

It is to be expected that the Lovestoneites, or a part of them, will enter the SP in the near future. This would mean that the Stalinist campaign and pressure from without would be supplemented by another force inside the SP working toward the same end – organic unity on a Stalinist basis. The special task of the Lovestoneites would be to poison the socialists with antagonism to the "Trotskyite sectarians" and to break down every means of contact and cooperation with us.

Concluding that service to the Fourth International "**needs a strong movement in the United States,**" Cannon urged his supporters inside the Workers Party to prepare for a much-required "**organizational turn,**" one that had to be implemented "**at this moment.**" Only by entering the SP and the YPSL, Cannon stressed, could the Workers Party, "make a determined drive to rally the socialist workers and the youth around our banner."¹⁷⁹

179 James P. Cannon to Dear Comrades, "The Split in the S.P. and Our Policy," 4 January 1936, in Box 49, Folder 7, "Cannon Correspondence, Houghton Library," GB Papers. On Cannon's

Cannon's explicit embrace of entryism was not, of course, without opponents. The extensive Minutes of the January 1936 Political Committee meetings of the Workers Party revealed a Muste-McKinney minority losing on a broad range of resolutions. But the voting was indicative of the extent to which Muste relied on a wider clique network of support that took in Abern, Weber, Glotzer, and others, none of whom were solidly aligned with the old AWP leader on the major political questions of the moment. These included not only the French turn and its Americanization, but the internal situation in former Musteite strongholds like Allentown. Meanwhile, the Cannon-Shachtman leadership consolidated its group, hardening support for Socialist Party entry and winning Trotsky, not surprisingly, to its position, a development culminating in a cable sent to Rose Karsner, declaring: "Personally in favor of entry, Leo." This latter development was hardly surprising. Yet it should not overwhelm the actual nature of events. Conventional wisdom, buttressed by Muste's subsequent judgement that Trotsky commanded his American followers to make an entry into the Socialist Party and that the International Communist League leader "controlled his followers ... as autocratically as Stalin controlled his," exhibiting both a "ruthlessness" as well as "glorying in that capacity," represents the French turn in the US as a *fait accompli* dictated by the ICL leader. There is no basis for concluding, as Muste did in a 1967 recollection, that Trotsky "was no less a dictator in his own party than Stalin was in his." Shachtman later claimed that Trotsky played little role in either the AWP/CLA fusion or the Workers Party's entry into the Socialist Party. These undertakings were initiated by others. Trotsky favored these organizational initiatives once they were explained to him, but he hardly orchestrated or ordered them.¹⁸⁰

views on the Lovestone group's possible activity in the Socialist Party at this time see also Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 223. Cannon of course kept Trotsky abreast of his thinking on these matters and developments associated with them. See Cannon to Trotsky, 10 January 1936; Cannon to Trotsky, 19 February 1936, Box 49, Folder 7, "Cannon Correspondence, Houghton Library," GB Papers.

- 180 On Muste's understandings of entryism as a Trotsky "order" and his view of this as dictatorial and controlling see Hentoff, ed., *Essays of A.J. Muste*, 169–170; Hentoff, *Peace Agitator*, 92–96; Muste, "My Experience in Labor and Radical Struggles of the Thirties," in Simon, ed., *As We Saw the Thirties*, 140. Note, as well, Venkataramani, "Leon Trotsky's Adventure in American Radical Politics, 1935–1937," 1–46, which presents a particularly stark view of Trotsky's directive nature on American entryism, largely ignoring what has been developed in detail above. Shachtman presents his view in "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 428, with Cannon's views evident in Speech Notes, "Internal Situation – Report – 8 February 1936," Box 29, Folder 1–7/Reel 35, JPC Papers. See, on Trotsky's cable to Karsner, the subsequent Trotsky to Cannon and Shachtman, 24 January 1936, in Naomi Allen and George Breitman, eds., *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1935–36]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 252.

Trotsky's role, in January 1936, was thus to confirm an orientation arrived at by Cannon, Shachtman, Dunne, Skoglund, Burnham, Swabeck, Gordon, Ramuglia and others, all of whom came to their position through considerable scrutiny and reflection with respect to the developing situation in the Socialist Party. Discussions within Workers Party groups aligned with Cannon politically were extensive and overwhelming in their endorsement of entry.¹⁸¹ At a 22 January 1936 Political Committee meeting, Cannon and Shachtman successfully secured endorsement for entry, it being argued that the situation inside the Socialist Party presented "highly favorable possibilities for the development of the revolutionary political movement in the U.S." Entry thus became "the main point of discussion" in the Workers Party "pre-convention period," with the National Committee urging all branches to take up the issue so that the party conference in slightly more than a month could decide on whether to accept the recommendation of the organization's leading bodies. It was in this context that Trotsky offered his support for entry. The oppositional Muste-Weber group within the National and Political Committees was largely reduced to refusing to vote on Cannon and Shachtman motions, expressing "apple pie" sentiments pledging commitment to "maintain the unity of the organization and abide unitedly by whatever decision the convention may take" on the proposed entry into the Socialist Party. But resentments were never far from the surface. One Muste-Weber statement declared, "The mere fact that C-S with, let us say, 300 supporters throughout the country, retain a factional majority in a party so reduced in numbers as the WP has been, certainly cannot be decisive for us. They had to deceive the party and bludgeon many of its members in order to get to the point where they dared to come out openly with the S.P. entry proposal at all. Even so the battle would have been a 50-50 one if the L.D. cable had not arrived when it did."

From quarters of residual Musteism such as Akron, which would soon contain a group of Abern cliquists, came heated objections to *New Militant* editorials outlining Socialist Party developments and assessing the respective roles of the Old Guard, the Militants, and the left wing.¹⁸² Glotzer wrote to Muste on 22 January 1936 that within the Socialist Party Albert Goldman was trumpeting the movement of the Workers Party into the Socialist Party, while other social democratic insiders seemed to know that entry of the Trotskyists was an inevitability. Ever willing to use gossip for factional purpose, Glotzer, who

181 Cannon to Comrades, 13 January 1936, "Bulletin on Group Voting," and Cannon to Comrades, 28 January 1936, "Bulletin No. 5," Box 49, Folder 7, "Cannon Correspondence, Houghton Library," GB Papers.

182 On Akron and the Abern clique see Hansen, "The Abern Clique," esp. 15, 17, 19.

had, throughout the fusion process of 1934, regarded Muste as a worthless centrist, passed on the insider knowledge of YPSL National Secretary, Ben Fisher, who returned to Chicago from New York full of tales about how the Workers Party was about to join the Socialist Party. Fisher apparently relayed to "a leading comrade" that even if the Workers Party decided not to join the Socialist Party, the Cannon group would do so on its own, and that means "Toledo and Minneapolis," which were ostensibly the only areas of interest to the Socialist Party. As for Muste, Fisher described him as "a political climber, a careerist ... afraid of the s.p. because he cannot work in one party with Norman Thomas!" The Muste-Weber clique, in this inner-circle back-biting, meant very little: "a late-discovered Oehlerite group which only made revelation since the Cannon group made its proposal to enter the s.p." In the end, Glotzer informed Muste, Fisher left the impression that, "**the only real leader** in the Party" was J.P. Cannon, a piece of news the Chicago anti-Cannonist punctuated with three exclamation marks!!! Fisher, needless to say, never managed to work his way into the good books of Glotzer.

Spector bolted, departing Toronto for Europe, without knowledge or endorsement of the Political and National Committees, intent on carrying to Trotsky the views of the Muste-Weber faction, which regarded itself as "the real fusion of the CLA and AWP and considers that it is the core of the movement for the Fourth International on American soil." The Muste-Weber group was convinced that it alone could challenge the "party-wrecking course and methods of the C-S leadership," and that it was under "no revolutionary obligation to bind ourselves in advance to accept the decision of a formal convention majority. ... It follows that if C-S by carrying through their SP entry proposals persist in disorganizing and splitting the party, it is not excluded that the responsibility for carrying on independently in the American working class movement may have to be assumed by our group." The resulting consultations with Spector did not move Trotsky off of his endorsement of entryism and, needless to say, the emissary of the Muste-Weber group was somewhat circumspect in articulating the apparent lengths to which these dissidents were willing to go to oppose "the provocative and demagogic maneuvers of C-S in the party." Trotsky, for his part, was forthright in telling Spector that he had telegraphed his personal support for the Workers Party entry into the Socialist Party "to overthrow a nearly equal balance in the Party to the side of Cannon." Spector conceded that something of this had indeed happened. Weber now wavered, but the Canadian opponent of entryism insisted that others in the minority would not quietly bend the political knee to giving up the independence of the revolutionary party. He claimed that, "Cannon has opened an attack, a vicious attack on us, on my trip," prophesying that the forthcoming Workers Party Convention discussion

on the Socialist Party and entry would “be like an old CLA convention,” raising the specter of a return to the bitter factionalism of the dog days. Trotsky was thus pressured to advise Cannon and Shachtman to “do everything possible to complete this step *in common* with the Muste-Weber group. Then your activities within the Socialist Party will be of greater significance for the successful outcome of the contemplated step.” Cannon and Shachtman would do their best, and it would not be without concrete results, but in the end keeping Muste on board proved an impossibility. Trotsky, optimistically writing to Muste, thought that, “This important step is dictated by the entire situation, and in a few months it will seem perfectly natural.”¹⁸³

183 The above paragraphs draw on Workers Party, Minutes, Political Committee, 8 January 1936; 22 January 1936, with attachment statements on the Socialist Party, Postponement of the Convention etc. by Cannon, Lewit, Shachtman, Swabeck, West & Muste, Weber; A.J. Muste to All Branches of the Workers Party; Glotzer to Muste, 22 January 1936, in Box 42, Folder 12, GB Papers. Muste promptly made the Glotzer letter available to the Political Committee, insuring that Cannon would be aware of its contents. For Trotsky's so-called early “personal” endorsement of the WP entering the SP see Letters “For Entry in the U.S.,” 24 January 1936, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1935–1936]*, 252–253, which includes the advice on winning over Muste/Weber, a position Trotsky had articulated months earlier. See Trotsky to Swabeck, 13 August 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers. Also, Trotsky to Cannon and Shachtman, 24 January 1935 Roll 5, Reel 3348; and “Statement of Muste-Weber on Convention Postponement,” 7 January 1936, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers; Trotsky, “A Crisis in the Workers Party,” and Trotsky to Muste, 8 February 1936, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1935–1936]*, 257–262. Glotzer's jaundiced view of Fisher, Spector's European trip, and views of the Muste-Weber Group are outlined in “The Steering Committee Resolved to send M.S. to Europe,” January 1936, from Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 10, Folder 4, in Socialist Party Entry, Chrono File, January – October 1936, Folder WP: January 1936; Glotzer to Cannon, 26 April 1936, in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 2, File 8, Folder WP: April 1936, PRL. On Spector's and Trotsky's conversation, which took place in Oslo, Norway see Transcript, “Conversation Between S. and T. on American Question,” February 1936, from Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 10, File 4, Folder WP: Feb 16–29, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936. Spector was aware, en route to see Trotsky, that “the Old Man” had cabled his endorsement of the Cannon-Shachtman position on entry, confessing that it was “not pleasant to be confronted with what amounts to an accomplished fact.” But Spector remained, in the immediate weeks before meeting Trotsky, of the view that, “one cannot change one's position merely on the basis of LD's intervention.” He was steeled in this stand by discussions with Henricus Sneevliet of the Dutch section of the International Communist League, who was an opponent of entry and adamant that Trotsky rescind his support for Cannon's position. The Muste-Weber group's views are also spelled out in Harold Isaacs correspondence with Trotsky. See, Spector to Comrades, 1 February 1936; Spector to Abern, 3 February 1936, both from Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 4, File 8; and Harold Isaacs to Trotsky, 6 February 1936, all in Folder, WP: 1–15 Feb, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936; Isaacs to Trotsky, 20 January 1936; 21 January 1936, Folder WP: January 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936; Sneevliet (Secretary, RSAP, Holland) to Convention of the

In letters to Trotsky in early January 1936, Cannon and Shachtman spelled out in considerable detail the case for entry into the Socialist Party. The split between the Old Guard conservatives and the Militant centrists was now, in the judgement of the two Workers Party leaders, definitive and “irremediable.” Seemingly confined to New York, this rupture, Cannon and Shachtman predicted, was almost certain to have national ramifications, with the Old Guard controlling money and party resources, and the Militants captivating the activists and the youth, benefitting from the personal popularity of the Socialist Party’s presidential candidate, Norman Thomas. A heterogeneous organization, the SP nonetheless contained a left wing and sincere proletarian elements desirous of developing as revolutionaries. The preeminent danger was that this contingent, instinctually drawn to the appeal of “organic unity” and “united front” collaboration with the Stalinists, would be absorbed into the Communist Party’s overt sphere of influence or drift to bodies such as the Lovestoneites. “The strategy of the Stalinists,” wrote Cannon in one letter, “is to concede everything and agree to anything in order to involve the socialists in joint activities and common organizations.” Already this maneuver had resulted in concrete collaborations between the SP and the CP in unemployed organizing, in the League Against War and Fascism, and in the merger of the Stalinist and Socialist student groups. Furthermore, Cannon hinted that the Communists were supplementing such activities “by a wholesale ‘colonization’ of Stalinists in the SP,” concluding that, **“I am very much afraid that we will not be able to counteract the Stalinist influence sufficiently from the outside.”** Particularly important was the necessity of being able to interact intimately with the YPSL’s 3,000–4,000 members. Within the YPSL, Cannon stressed, the politics of Trotskyism, evidenced in positions on war and criticisms of the Comintern, were now well established. In Cannon’s assessment, the YPSLs were ripe for recruitment to the Fourth International, but “What is required is that our leading group of the youth gain direct access to the organization through entry.”

As to entry’s possibilities, Cannon and Shachtman were sober in their evaluation, but optimistic. The left wing and the youth of the Socialist Party wanted the Workers Party to join with them, the reformists and right centrists were opposed. Many Militants welcomed a Trotskyist entry, if only to secure a counterweight to both the right wing and the Stalinists, adding ballast to the demand for party democracy. The fluid situation inside the American party of social democracy demanded, in Cannon’s and Shachtman’s view, an immediate

WPUSA, 17 February 1936, Folder WP: 16–29 February, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936.

response. "To think of coping with the new developments in the s.p., highly favorable to the growth of our movement, by the method of sending a couple of dozen of our rank and file, more or less unknown and inexperienced comrades, into the s.p. is like trying to catch whales with a fishing net. Not a fraction – the season for that vegetable is passed. The whole Party must now enter the s.p."

Against this view, Cannon and Shachtman reported, stood the Muste-Weber group (referred to as the Muste-Abern group in Abern clique correspondence) which was "trying to work up a hysteria in the party about 'liquidationism', 'capitulation', etc., very much in the Bauer-Oehler style. The question of entry is put as though it is a matter of betrayal on the one side and loyalty to the Fourth International on the other." Fully aware of the dangers of entry into a centrist organization, Cannon and Shachtman nonetheless embraced the initiative, given the context of January 1936, wholeheartedly, although in their political approach to the French turn there were suggestions of possible differences that would surface later. Emanuel [Manny] Geltman, for instance, claimed in a 1972 interview with Constance Ashton Myers, that Shachtman's views "were actually at the extreme right end of the remaining Socialist Party, not differing substantially from [Paul] Porter's or [Harry] Laidler's," a politics of accommodation that Cannon would certainly not have shared, whatever his enthusiasm for entry. None of this, however, rattled the Cannon-Shachtman alliance, and Cannon punctuated the imperative of the moment with a terse final assessment, telling Trotsky: "If we do not act now, the opportunity will very probably not return."¹⁸⁴

184 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon and Shachtman to Trotsky, no date [January 1936], Roll 3, Reel 3346; and Cannon to Trotsky, 10 January 1936, Roll 10, Reel 3355, MS Papers; Hansen, "The Abern Clique," 16. See also Cannon and Shachtman to Trotsky, 4 January 1936, in "Confidential: Discussion Material for the Leadership of the ICL sections concerning the eventual entry of the WPUSA into the SP," in Folder WP: Feb 16–29, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936. These Cannon-Shachtman letters to Trotsky were certainly sent *before* Trotsky cabled Rose Karsner on 24 January 1936, indicating his personal support for entry, thus establishing that Trotsky did not "order" the Workers Party members to enter the Socialist Party, but that he endorsed this initiative, proposed by Cannon and Shachtman in extensive communications. See Venkataramani, "Leon Trotsky's Adventure in American Radical Politics, 1935–1937," 1. On Geltman's views of Shachtman's positions see Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 231, n. 21.

11 Prelude to Entry: Cannon in Harness and Muste's Conversions

Things did indeed move quickly. Cannon and Shachtman, building on the Workers Party discussions that resulted in the exit of the Oehler faction and Trotsky's endorsement of entry into the Socialist Party, effectively and relatively quickly won over the bulk of the membership/branches to their stand.

Cannon's correspondence from mid-January to late February 1936 was extensive, some of the key material being circulated to caucus members in regular internal bulletins. **Bulletin No. 5**, for instance, issued on 28 January 1936, reported on developments relevant to entry and its supporters in Plentywood, Montana, where, over the course of 1935, some 60 members of the WP consolidated, many of them drawn out of the Communist Party, and a propaganda organ, the *Producers News*, established. Plentywood topped the polls in a 1935 *New Militant* subscription drive, reaching 120 percent of its target when Chicago and New York could barely achieve 15 percent. Cannon also communicated on happenings in Detroit, New York, San Diego, and Los Angeles, where the Weberite group's influence was breaking down. Muste-Weber threats of a "split" were excoriated, with Cannon imploring the ranks to spare no effort in mobilizing support for unity. Utilizing humor, Cannon offered a denunciation of Spector's European peregrinations, undertaken without "the knowledge of the PC and behind its back," under the title, "WINTER SPORTS."¹⁸⁵

For the most part, however, Cannon occupied himself with patient and detailed communication with Cannon-Shachtman caucus members across the country (and in Canada), one critical document of which was a coherent and convincing six-page statement, "The Split in the SP and Our Policy";¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ James P. Cannon to Comrades, "Bulletin No. 5," 28 January 1936, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers. Workers Party, Minutes, Political Committee, 22 January 1936, Box 42, Folder 12, GB Papers, passed a motion, 4–3, rejecting the manner in which the Spector trip had been undertaken, "without the knowledge of the Political Committee and behind its back," and emphatically objecting "to any consideration of the American question on the representations of Spector without the majority of the PC and the NC being given an opportunity to present their views." Spector's actions were condemned as "utterly irresponsible and individualistic," with Trotsky and the International Secretariat to be informed of the motion. For Plentywood see Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 29 July 1935, Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers; and on background Verlaine Stoner McDonald, *The Red Corner: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Northeastern Montana* (Helena, MT: Montana Historical Society, 2010); "Plentywood and Youngstown Tie," *New Militant*, 27 April 1935.

¹⁸⁶ James P. Cannon, "The Split in the SP and Our Policy," no date [January – February 1936?], Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers; Henry Kennedy (Workers' Party of Canada) to Cannon, 5 February 1936; Anton and Maria Pennyaska to Cannon, 6 February 1936; Cannon to Pennyaska, 12 February 1936; Barney Mayes to Cannon, 10 February 1936; Bill Munroe (?) to Cannon,

ongoing reports and responses involving field operatives such as Sam Gordon (Allentown, Pennsylvania), Ted Selander (Toledo), and Bert Cochran (Akron/Toledo);¹⁸⁷ pedagogical letters of advice and instruction to young supporters such as Lester Heckman and Ruth Querio (Allentown), George Breitman (Newark), and the trio of Edward Everett, Ray Sparrow, and Charles Curtiss (Los Angeles);¹⁸⁸ and routine exchanges with his closest collaborators, Max Shachtman and Vincent Ray Dunne.¹⁸⁹

This voluminous archive, articulating the tactical necessity of entry into the Socialist Party and a painstaking commitment to bring all manner of comrades around to his way of thinking, revealed a Cannon who was strategically adept, engaged with his comrades on a multitude of levels, and physically tireless. Moreover, he orchestrated the campaign to secure support for the pro-

10 February 1936; Cannon to Louis Nagy, 12 February 1936; David T. Burbank to Cannon, 12 February 1936; Cannon to Hansen, 16 February 1936; Bernard Wolfe to Cannon, 16 February 1936; Cannon to Burbank, 16 February 1936; Cannon to Granger, 21 February 1936; Cannon to Wolfe, 221 February 1936; Cannon to Mayes, no date [21–26 February 1936?]; Cannon to Roberts, 26 February 1936; Cannon to Comrade Samorodin, 26 February 1936; Cannon to Comrades, Bulletin #6, New York, 17 February 1936, Box 3, Folder 8/Reel 3, JPC Papers.

187 Gordon to Cannon, 27 January 1936; Gordon to Cannon, 3 February 1936; Cochran to Cannon, 3 February 1936; Cannon to Gordon, 4 February 1936; Gordon to Cannon, 6 February 1936; Cochran, Selander, Preis, Pollock to Cannon, 10 February 1936; Selander to Cannon, 12 February 1936; Cannon to Gordon, 16 February 1936; Cannon to Cochran, 16 February 1936; Gordon to Cannon, 17 February 1936; Cannon to Gordon, 21 February 1936; Cannon to Gordon, 21 February 1936; Cochran to Cannon, 22 February 1936; Gordon to Cannon, 24 February 1936, Box 3, Folder 8/Reel 3, JPC Papers.

188 Cannon to Querio, 17 January 1936; Heckman to Cannon, 23 January 1936; Ray Sparrow to Cannon, 26 January 1936; Charles Curtiss to Cannon, 1 February 1936; Heckman to Cannon, 4 February 1936; Everett to Cannon, 6 February 1936; Everett to Cannon, 7 February 1936; Heckman to Cannon, 10 February 1936; Cannon to Curtiss, 10 February 1936; Cannon to Gordon, no date [10 February 1936]; Sparrow to Cannon, 10 February 1936; Cannon to Everett, 10 February 1936; Cannon to Heckman, 10 February 1936; Everett to Cannon, 11 February 1936; Cannon to Breitman, 12 February 1936; Cannon to Gordon, 12 February 1936; Cannon to Everett, 12 February 1936; Gordon to Cannon, 12 February 1936; Everett to Cannon, 13 February 1936; Breitman to Cannon, 14 February 1936; Everett to Cannon, 14 February 1936; Cannon to Everett, 15 February 1936; Everett to Cannon, 18 February 1936; Cannon to Breitman, 21 February 1936, Box 3, Folder 8, Reel 3, JPC Papers. On Querio see Le Blanc, "Remembering Ruth Querio," *Left Americana*, 81–87.

189 Dunne to Cannon, 3 February 1936; Shachtman to Cannon, 7 February 1936; Shachtman to Cannon, 9 February 1936; Cannon to Dunne, 10 February 1936; Shachtman to Cannon, 12 February 1936; Dunne to Cannon, 13 February 1936; Dunne to Cannon, 14 February 1936; Cannon to Shachtman, 15 February 1936; Cannon to Dunne, 17 February 1936; Shachtman to Cannon/Cannon to Shachtman, no date [17 February 1936]; Cannon to Dunne, 19 February 1936; Cannon to Shachtman, 19 February 1936, Box 3, Folder 8/Reel 3, JPC Papers.

posed entry while trying to negotiate difficult personal straits, forcing Cannon to take up a waged appointment to the Historical Records Survey Project of the New York City Works Project Administration, a job that commenced in mid-February 1936, at the point the Workers Party was consumed by the entry discussion. Cannon joked with Vincent Ray Dunne: "I am going to work for the government today – WPA. The revolutionary movement is thus relieved of the burden of my maintenance and is freed from any interference by me for seven or eight hours a day." For Cannon this was "a lucky turn of events," at a "delightfully appropriate" time. Yet he wondered if perhaps Morris Lewit was not right that this was merely one more "conspiracy of the government against the vanguard of the vanguard." In actuality, Cannon put in little time researching for the WPA, a rank-and-file member apparently "covering" for him, meeting the Trotskyist leader in the morning, taking on his assignments, and heading off to the library to write up the notes that could then be passed on to the government supervisors.¹⁹⁰ Cannon headed off to the revolutionary headquarters, where his accomplishments in this period were considerable.

He managed, for instance, to bring the dissident Konikow forces in Boston on side. Cannon solidified his relations with the young, and somewhat impetuous, proletarian branch leader, Larry Trainor, who was pushed by Cannon to recognize that the revolutionary movement valued its longtime loyalists, such as Dr. Antoinette Konikow, a founding figure in the Trotskyist American Left Opposition. Trainor tended toward a mechanical understanding of class place as a determinant of stature in the revolutionary movement, but Cannon stressed that proletarian origins, while important, should not alone determine decisions about representation at party conventions and the value of a comrade's views: "The election of Comrade A. Konikow and yourself as delegates from the branch is OK," Cannon wrote, responding to Trainor's complaint, "You must remember that she is an old timer in the movement and that entitles her to certain considerations in such matters. The fact that she is not an actual wage worker is not in itself an argument against her coming." Pointing out that non-proletarian figures, including Marx and Engels, had contributed mightily to the revolutionary left, Cannon reminded Trainor that, "Many excellent commun-

190 Crete Hutchinson, Assistant Chief Project Supervisor, History Records Survey, to J.P. Cannon, 29 January 1936; Cannon to Dunne, 17 February 1936, Box 3, Folder 8/Reel 3, JPC Papers. Harry Roskolenko, also working for the WPA, later claimed that he did Cannon's work, taking his assignments to the library, as Cannon looked after political matters for what must have been the Workers Party (Roskolenko claims this took place in 1937, but it was more likely in 1936). See Harry Roskolenko, *When I Was Last on Cherry Street* (New York: Stein and Day, 1965), 178–179.

ists are intellectuals and professionals of one kind or another,” admonishing his young protégé, “Be careful that you do not fall into a too narrow conception of class distinctions inside the party.”¹⁹¹

To Ruth Querio, embroiled in the day-to-day struggles and contentions of an old Musteite stronghold, Cannon offered his appreciation of “the extraordinary difficulties which confront the comrades in the Allentown situation.” Querio had organized a minority group of 20 or so Cannon-Shachtman supporters, but was obviously frustrated at the slow pace of bringing comrades in the Workers Party on side with respect to the proposed entry into the Socialist Party. “Time and education and experience are all necessary factors,” Cannon wrote, advising his supporter that, “We must persist and persevere and take consolation in the fact that we are gaining, and will continue to gain as long as we act like Bolshevik politicians and not like chickens with their heads cut off. Danton said that audacity was the first merit of revolutionists. He might have added that patience comes next.” This was easily said, much more difficult to do, and Cannon offered his young comrade the benefit of some self-criticism: “Please don’t think that I am simply lecturing you. I am really directing this just as much at myself, because impatience is my own fault, also.”¹⁹²

This correspondence reveals Cannon at his extraordinary party-building best, generous in his assessments of comrades, but firm in his conviction that steadfast political principle must determine policy and it was best “not to let personal antagonisms play too great a role.” To Toledo’s Ted Selander, driven to distraction by the inability of anyone in the Workers Party to nail down the Illinois miners’ militant, Gerry Allard (at this time aligned with Abern), who expressed confusion and worry about the entry tactic to Dunne and did his best to avoid communicating with other industrial organizers in the Midwest, such as the strongly pro-Cannon Ohio group led by Selander and Cochran, Cannon showed a conciliatory and good-natured disposition. “Don’t judge Gerry too one-sidedly by his showing in your political conference,” suggested Can-

191 Trainor to Cannon, 14 February 1936; Cannon to Trainor, 20 February 1936, and on the Konikows moving into Cannon’s camp in this period, embracing entry and promoting Cannon coming to Boston to speak, Konikow to Cannon, 4 February 1936; Konikow to Cannon, 17 February 1936; Cannon to Konikow, 20 February 1936, Box 3, Folder 8, Reel 3, JPC Papers. Contrast Cannon’s pedagogical approach to Trainor with respect to the Boston situation with the Abern clique’s personalist assessment, stressing the influence of the “red professor/major Yaroslavsky”, John G. Wright, and other problems associated with the Konikows, making Boston “the worst place for this sort of thing.” Hansen, “The Abern Clique,” 15.

192 Cannon’s letter to Querio is reproduced in Le Blanc, “Remembering Ruth Querio,” *Left Americana*, 81–87.

non, noting Allard probably revealed his weakest side. "He has merits which are not brought out when he is under political pressure. If we could make a Bolshevik out of Gerry politically, we would have a very good man. We have been trying this for nearly ten years and I'll have to admit it is quite a job."¹⁹³

The hard slogging that Cannon had put in on Gerry Allard over the years seemed paralleled, in January – February 1936, by the forbearance he exercised in clearing the path to a Socialist Party entry. This included promoting the rapprochement of the Workers and Socialist Parties in the unity negotiations of the National Unemployed League and the Workers Alliance of America, and countless trying meetings in New York with would-be "Militants" such as the former Communist/Lovestoneite Herbert Zam, the New York Local's secretary, Jack Altman, Max Delson, and six or seven others.¹⁹⁴ Cannon, accompanied at various times by Burnham, Carter, Ramuglia, and Lewit used these meetings to discuss many things, among them differences between the Trotskyists and the Socialist Party left wingers over issues such as the Labor Party, the Fourth International, orientation to the Soviet Union, and "excessive attention to the Stalinists, whom some of the smart ones think should be ignored." One of the high cards that Cannon continued to play was the necessity and possibility of developing the Trotskyist press in the United States as the *New Militant* shifted gears under the lane-change necessitated by entry. Cannon thought the possibly of a "campaign daily" that would be quite different than the Socialist Party's *Call*, and might be "put across at an initial cost of \$10,000," could be realizable. This intrigued some of the "Militants." He also worked around the clock to consolidate the New York caucus, which held group meetings to discuss entry that attracted 100 or more Workers Party members. To a Los Angeles comrade, Cannon wrote enthusiastically about one such well-attended meeting where it was "voted unanimously to assess themselves a half week's pay each, all to be paid in two or three weekly installments. This fund is

193 Dunne to Cannon, 3 February 1936; Cochran to Cannon, 3 February 1936; Cannon to Selander, no date, responding to a letter of 10 February 1936; Cannon to Trainor, 20 February 1936, Box 3, Folder 8, Reel 3, JPC Papers; Hansen, "The Abern Clique," 7.

194 For an introduction to the politics of the New York "Militants" within the Socialist Party see *Towards a Militant Program for the Socialist Party of America* (New York: "Militant" Socialists, 1934), which differs from the politics of Trotskyism around a number of international questions and with respect to how the transition to socialism will be realized. This "Militant" program also declared that not only had a successful proletarian revolution been carried through in Russia, it was also "maintained" (33), and the "Militants" lacked a critique of Stalinism. For Shachtman's assessment of Altman, an early and influential Militant, see "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 274–277. Zumoff, "The Left in the United States and the Decline of the Socialist Party," contains much of relevance.

to take care of convention expenses which will be very heavy and which will fall entirely upon us.”¹⁹⁵

Cannon and Shachtman both saw Chicago as pivotal in building support for entryism. This entailed breaking the back of the Weberite opposition, which consolidated in the leadership of the Chicago branch and, according to Shachtman, was alienating the Windy City’s best members with its “sleepiness, its lack of initiative, its incompetence.” With Cannon holding down the entryist fort in New York, Shachtman was dispatched to Chicago, where he reported that he “wasted no time at all on Glotzer,” convinced that his old factional ally and a Weberite associate, Norman Satir, had already lost their grip on the branch, to the point that they were not likely to be elected delegates to the forthcoming Workers Party convention, but would almost certainly attend by virtue of their national leadership roles. Instead, Shachtman concentrated his powers of persuasion (which some thought were being laid on “too thick”) on an oppositional group in Chicago led by two “case-hardened” comrades, Francis Heisler [F.X. Ferry] and Gregory. Cannon drafted a comprehensive nine-page, single-spaced letter addressed to Heisler, which was distributed throughout the WP ranks. He also tried to arrange for Vincent Ray Dunne to travel from Minneapolis to Chicago, stressing how important a meeting with Heisler would be, pressing home the necessity of entering the Socialist Party as a united body, doing so with conviction. “A mere grudging acceptance of discipline is not sufficient now,” Cannon stressed. Shachtman also debated Muste before the Chicago membership of the Workers Party, and circulated his document on “unprincipled combinationism,” to which Glotzer threatened a reply. Muste, according to Shachtman, had little to say about the Socialist Party, descended into Oehlerism, reported that Spector, after meeting with Trotsky in Europe, remained firm in his opposition to the SP entry, and castigated the opportunism of the so-called liquidators. Gains were registered with individuals, but Shachtman thought two years of Weberite leadership had taken its toll. Unless some solid Trotskyist militants could be sent to Chicago, headed by a Swabeck relocation (which, Cannon reported, was not in the cards, Arne’s “long sojourn in the metropolis” having cooled his ardor for a return to “the fishing village on the banks of the Lake”), Shachtman feared “the second most important political center in the country will be a permanent Glotzerian pain in the

195 Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 124–125; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 224–226; Cannon to Selander, “The NUL-WAA Unity Negotiations,” 9 January 1936; Cannon to Shachtman, no date [10 February 1936?]; Cannon to Shachtman, 14 February 1936; Cannon to Comrade [Everett?], 14 February 1936; Argus Publishing to V.R. Dunne, 22 February 1936; Cannon to Shachtman, no date [17 February 1936?], Box 3, Folder 8, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

neck to us." Weberism being anything but resolute, Shachtman sensed that not only Muste, but Glotzer, Satir, John Edwards, and the dissident Heisler-Gregory group would go along with entry. If there were positive signs of what Cannon reported to supporters throughout the country as "the Muste-Weber combination cracking wide open" (not only in Chicago but also in New York), and some shimmer of possibility in young comrades in Chicago's Spartacus Youth League committed to vanquishing "Weberism for good," Shachtman was not entirely optimistic about the future prospects. On the immediate issue of entry, Shachtman judged that Chicago would "come along," with the various groups "dragging their feet as if they were fettered to the wallpost of an inescapable past." But the Chicago branch was "pretty bad. You get the impression of being in some nightmare or other, peopled by dead souls with spiritless, dull eyes, without hope, without vision, without perspective, without faith." Shachtman likened the politics of Chicago's WP to a "dank cellar," and the native New Yorker longed for "the sunny outer world" of his east coast metropolitan center. Cannon insisted, however, that Shachtman remain in Chicago until the eve of the convention. "I think it is very important for you to stay ... until a firm group supporting our position 100% and lined up for future consolidation is definitively constituted. It is not enough to get a delegate or two to the convention. We must have a group there for our future work."¹⁹⁶

If there was a bright spot in Chicago that Cannon and Shachtman discerned, it was Albert Goldman. Resolutely firm in his support for his old comrades in the Workers Party and their proposed entry into the Socialist Party where he was now ensconced, the revolutionary Chicago attorney was providing Cannon with an insider's perspective on the evolving political differentiation of American social democracy. He lost no opportunity to promote the prospects of a left wing inside the SP, aligning with Cannon and other advocates of entry. Cannon urged Shachtman "to talk to Al again ... right away. Believe it or not, it is more important than the education of Edwards or Glotzer." Two days later Shachtman met with "several members of Goldman's group," hashing out the prospects of "a Militant-Old Guard patch-up," an unlikely occurrence in the opinion of the Socialist Party left wingers. Shachtman wrote to Cannon in mid-February 1936 that, "Goldman is starting to put the squeeze on from

196 Cannon to Comrade Heisler, 30 January 1936; Shachtman to Cannon, 7 February 1936; Shachtman to Cannon, 9 February 1936; Cannon to Heckman, 10 February 1936; Cannon to Curtiss, 10 February 1936; Cannon to Shachtman, no date [10 February 1936?]; Cannon to Dunne, 10 February 1936; Cannon to Shachtman, 14 February 1936; Cannon to Comrades, Bulletin #6, New York, 17 February 1936; Cannon to Shachtman, 19 February 1936, Box 3, Folder 8/ Reel 3, JPC Papers.

here. This Saturday there will be the first enlarged caucus meeting of the general 'Militant' elements, at which he will put forward a resolution advocating that the Trotskyists be welcomed into the party, if and when they decide to enter." Goldman even supported materially Shachtman's cash-strapped February Chicago sojourn. Cannon kept Goldman apprised of developments relating to entry, corresponded with him about the *Socialist Appeal*, and inquired as to how Goldman imagined cooperation with the Cannon-Shachtman forces in the aftermath of a potential entry. "It is doubly necessary for us, in making this turn, to emphasize organizational formalities in our discussions with the comrades at the convention," Cannon wrote to Goldman at the end of February 1936. Stressing the danger "of looseness and individualism developing in the s.p. when formal discipline will no longer have the effectiveness that is possible in a completely independent organization," Cannon broached with Goldman how "you would contemplate the re-establishment of organizational relations," pointing out that, "There is still considerable sensitiveness amongst our comrades in regard to your individualistic course of a year and a half ago. Your prominence only serves to emphasize the problem and might tempt others to regard it as a precedent."¹⁹⁷

These kinds of discussions spoke of confidence in the outcome of the entry discussions. And, in fact, Cannon and Shachtman were convinced that the end they desired was secured, although this did not lessen their resolve to proceed carefully and resolutely. Cannon wrote to Dunne on 10 February 1936: "We are on the eve [of] a historical turn and confront a great opportunity to reap the fruit of our long struggle. All the comrades must be up on their toes. Above all, they must be imbued with the spirit of Bolshevik discipline and sacrifice." As the wp convention approached, at which the issue of entry would be voted on, Cannon estimated in caucus bulletins that 90 percent of the membership were in favor of the turn into the Socialist Party. Privately, he calculated that 19 of the delegates were committed to Muste, while fully 45 were aligned with himself and Shachtman. In New York 20 of the 21 delegates were for entry, and in

197 Cannon to Dunne, 10 February 1936; Shachtman to Cannon, no date [13 February 1936?]; Cannon to Shachtman, 15 February 1936; Cannon to Shachtman, no date [17 February 1936?]; Cannon to Goldman, 26 February 1936, Box 3 Folder 8/Reel 3, JPC Papers. For Glotzer's view of this period in Chicago, which encompasses positive views of Goldman and work within the sp along with ongoing hostility to Cannon, see Albert Glotzer to James Burnham and Arne Swabeck, 20 January 1936, Folder wp: January 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936. Goldman used the pages of the *Socialist Appeal* to carry on public discussions with wp figures such as Shachtman around issues like support for a Labor Party, thus elevating the level of political education within the sp. See Goldman, "Should Socialists Favor a Labor Party," *Socialist Appeal*, 1 (May 1935), 6–12A.

the proletarian strongholds of Toledo and Minneapolis, all nine delegates were lined up to enter the SP. Muste's support was concentrated in old AWP strongholds such as Allentown, Pennsylvania, with four delegates; Chicago remained, in a worst case scenario, the only other locale that might be able to command two or more delegate votes against entry; and Muste's strength was actually overstated in such tabulations, scattered in single-delegate votes across 13 locales.¹⁹⁸

To secure a favorable resolution of the entry controversy, Cannon did his best to win Muste over, meeting with him in early February 1936 for a "long talk." Other sit-downs followed. "It appears likely that we will be able to arrive at a reconciliation so as to enter the SP unitedly," Cannon wrote to Vincent Ray Dunne. He encouraged his Minneapolis comrade to meet Muste in Chicago, impressing upon the former AWP leader the necessity of entering the Socialist Party and conveying as well that this position now commanded a strong majority within the Workers Party ranks. Appealing to Muste's instinctual dislike of factional battle, Cannon urged Dunne to stress that "we now have to decide whether the convention will be the scene of a bitter struggle leaving a lot of wounds or a real consolidation of the party for a united step forward." Cannon felt the best approach to Muste was to stress the decisive point: entry was going to happen and that "the basic collaboration which existed in the early months of the WP must be restored."

Young militants whom Muste baptized in epic battles of class conflict, such as Toledo's Ted Selander, wrote to their old teacher, "reminding him of the years we have been in common struggle." Selander let Muste know that if a split developed in the Workers Party around entryism, the Workers Party National Secretary would be "committing political suicide." The current situation demanded keeping "the 4th Internationalists intact by loyally abiding by the convention decisions." Selander wrote to Cannon: "Glad to learn that Muste is making overtures towards reconciliation and trust that you will successfully re-establish a working agreement on the basis of the convention decisions." Bert Cochran concurred. Cannon thus worked diligently to secure "a formal peace agreement with Muste." He recognized the necessity of working through the internal situation in the Workers Party thoroughly and sensitively, but as he told Shachtman privately, "Most of our people seem to thrive on this sort of a thing, but I can't take it any more." Still, he persevered, even as Muste waffled from one position to the next. If, in one meeting, Muste hinted at acceptance

198 Cannon Calculations, "Cannon/Muste," 19 February 1936, Box 3, Folder 8, Reel 3, JPC Papers.

of entry and reconciliation, he might revert to threats in a new document, stating that even though he was unsure whether differences over entry constituted principled, strategic opposition or tactical choices, it was “permissible to split” on either basis. Cochran confided to Cannon, with respect to the mercurial Muste: “What he will do is impossible to state until Spector returns from Europe. (Two weeks before the convention.)” Cannon confirmed this assessment, informing the pro-entry caucus in a bulletin dated 17 February 1936 that, in spite of conferences with Muste to “come to an agreement for common work and harmonious collaboration **on the basis of entry into the SP, [n]othing definite was decided.**” But all indications pointed to the possibility of Muste coming on board, especially if the strength of the majority was increased by “winning over rank and file comrades to our position, and making a split organizationally impossible.” Willing to extend the hand of conciliation, Cannon pushed the necessity of “fighting for political aims, not for personal victories, or personal revenge. We should make it clear to all the comrades that we are ready to resume common work in a comradely spirit and without any discrimination once the political line for this ... is firmly established.”¹⁹⁹

The Musteite opposition was in fact fragmented and forlorn, with Muste having no capacity to actually lead a serious factional battle. Too many talented former AWP operatives had gone over to Cannon, while others bled away to rival currents, like the Communists. The Weber side of the Muste-Weber caucus was, in the fray of serious debate within the WP, exhibiting signs of dissolution, even in strongholds like Chicago. On the west coast, to be sure, there remained pockets of Weberite resilience, and in Salt Lake City hard-core youthful Abern-Weber supporters such as Joe and Reba Hansen seemed immovable. Edward Everett wrote to Cannon that, “Evidently Salt Lake City now constitutes the darkest spot west of the Rockies.” Everett worried that, “Unless the Muste-Weber followers are extricated from sectarianism NOW many of them will ossify and some of them will be so demoralized as to be lost for the movement for a long time, perhaps forever.” But gains were coming the way of the advocates of entry. Murry Weiss, formerly a Weberite, was brought into the Cannon-Shachtman caucus by the work of Everett and Charles Curtiss. Elsewhere, too, especially in Ohio, things looked solid, an entire corps of talented Musteite industrial organizers gravitating to Cannon and Shachtman. Cannon played up the defeat of the Musteites in his *History of American Trotskyism*,

199 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon to Dunne, 10 February 1936; Selander to Cannon, 12 February 1936; Cochran to Cannon, 14 February 1936; Cannon to Shachtman, no date [10 February 1936?]; Cochran to Cannon, 22 February 1936; Cannon to Comrades, Bulletin 6, New York, 17 February 1936, Box 3, Folder 8/Reel 3, JPC Papers.

obviously relishing in the use of religious metaphors: "They fought with holy zeal against our proposal to dissolve the church of the Lord and go and join the heretic Socialists." They defended the "'independence' of the Workers Party as though it were the Ark of the Covenant and we were laying profane hands upon it." But in actuality, while Muste and those aligned with Weber, Abern, and Glotzer, no doubt opposed entry and carped aplenty, with Trotsky's unambiguous embrace of the Cannon-Shachtman position in late January and February 1936, the fight had all but gone out of any effective WP opposition. One St. Louis, Missouri, Workers Party member, David T. Burbank, wrote to Cannon in mid-February 1936, his own mind on the question of entry not yet made up. But he was convinced that "Comrades Muste, Weber, Glotzer, and the others of their group, are entirely prepared to abide by the decision of the majority of the Party, whatever it may be." Muste, staunchly opposed to entry as late as 18 February 1936 had, for his part, largely thrown in the towel by the end of the month, dispirited by Spector's report of his conversations with Trotsky and the sad news that a small group of former Musteites, led by Arnold Johnson, had capitulated to Stalinism.²⁰⁰

Protest nonetheless lingered. It emanated from the leadership of the Spartacus Youth, where Glotzer confidante, Abern cliquist, and Weberite, Nathan Gould, early banged the drum of anti-Cannon resentment. In a "Statement of Comrade Gould on Decision to Hold National Convention of Spartacus Youth League on March 6–7, 1936," the dissident youth leader and National Committee member took exception to the decision to follow the second annual Workers Party convention with a youth gathering, the choice in part premised on the presence of many SYLers at the preceding party conference. Gould saw in this action little more than a "move on the part of the Cannonites" to hold "what in essence will be a rump convention" that conveniently excluded those sections of the SYL distant from New York that could not attend on short notice the 7–8 March conference. It was precisely these branches, with Gould citing the midwestern youth leagues of Chicago, Gillespie, Champaign, and Indiana Harbor, "that opposed the Cannon entry line." This cynical conference scheduling, Gould insisted, prohibited discussion and was an "uncommunist" attempt to stifle the youth and "carry through the decision of entry of our organization into the Socialist organization by default." Gould also authored an oppos-

200 Everett to Cannon, 13 February 1936; 14 February 1936; Burbank to Cannon, 12 February 1936; Cannon to Burbank, 16 February 1936, Box 3 Folder 8/Reel 3, JPC Papers; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 223; Muste to Comrades, 18 February 1936; Muste to Comrades, 27/29 February 1936, both from Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 8, File 36, in Folder WP: Feb 16–29, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936.

itional majority SYL resolution, repudiating the entry orientation and favoring the independent existence of both the Workers Party and the Spartacus Youth League as autonomous expressions “of the proletariat and the youth.”²⁰¹

Such dissent notwithstanding, when the Workers Party’s second annual convention met at the end of February/beginning of March 1936, the “Resolution on the Socialist Party” passed unanimously. It called on all revolutionaries to monitor developments inside the now fractured and differentiated social democratic body closely, with the intention of advancing the prospects of the Workers Party. Harold Isaacs, formerly of the Muste-Weber group and once given to chastising Cannon’s behavior, informed Trotsky that the convention originally voted 50–20 to endorse entry, and that the conduct of the Cannon-Shachtman majority was “exemplary.” Weber was offered a place on the National Committee slate when his former group snubbed him for going over to the entryist camp. Spector, according to Isaacs, returned from his meeting with Trotsky “with his split views essentially unchanged.” Cannon and Shachtman won the day, reported Isaacs, and secured the support of revolutionaries committed to building the Fourth International. In assuming “an attitude of complete organizational conciliation,” the Cannon-Shachtman forces insured that the convention, which opened “with the threat of split,” concluded on a foundation of unity. Deeply impressed by the effort made “to explain fully, completely, and at length the political meaning of their course,” Isaacs experienced an about-turn on his assessment of Cannon, reporting to Trotsky: “I believe it is a remarkable testimony to the quality of the leadership that our WP, practically alone in the ICL, has been able to execute this turn without a convulsion and a split. My own great enthusiasm is heightened, of course, by the fact that this lesson has also liberated me from a whole set of cock-eyed notions (*idees fausses*) which I realize now I absorbed from a clique atmosphere.” Isaacs was thus pleased at the reaching of a “complete détente in the

201 Spartacus Youth League, National Committee, Minutes, 25 January 1936, with attachments, “Statement of Comrade Gould on Decision to Hold National Convention of Spartacus Youth League on 6 March 1936,” “Statement on Majority Resolution (Gould) and Minority Resolution (Garrett),” and “Replies to the Referendum Vote Taken of Members of the National Committee of the SYL on the Cannon Proposal for Entry into the SP,” Box 42, Folder 12, GB Papers; Workers Party, Minutes, Political Committee, 4 February 1936, Folder 18, PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee. On Gould and anti-Cannonism see Shachtman, “Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?” 55, 57. Manny Geltman [Garrett], a Cannon supporter in the Spartacus Youth, opposed Gould. See Garrett to the Political Committee, 27 January 1936, in Folder WP: January 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936.

factional struggle,” and felt heartened to proceed into the SP “with a leadership that commands, by its own showing, our unqualified confidence.”²⁰²

Isaacs’s claims of an end to factionalism were no doubt exaggerated. If the Muste-Weber Group obviously disintegrated in the aftermath of the convention, the clique now headed by Abern and Glotzer remained in place. The politics of entry may well have been decided, but the personalized factionalism had not entirely subsided. Abern wrote Glotzer in April 1936, noting that he remained friendly with Weber, but “politically, it must be said, his is now the role of a Cannon stooge,” his purpose to “make Cannonites.” “I hardly see this as required obeisance,” Abern added sourly.²⁰³

Inside the National Committee of the Workers Party, an institutionalized majority of six was composed of Cannon, Shachtman, Burnham, Swabeck, Lewit, and an unnamed youth delegate to be assigned later, while a minority of Muste, Abern, and Spector agreed unanimously to place Cannon “in charge of work on entry into the S.P.” Muste, who delivered a convention minority report against entry before signing on to entry, retained his post as figurehead National Secretary. But he promptly headed for Akron, where he was able to lick the wounds of factional defeat in mounting the class struggle podium, championing the striking rubber workers at the Goodyear tire plant before being dispatched by the National Committee to Youngstown, Columbus, and New Castle to inform Workers Party comrades about the Convention’s decisions.²⁰⁴

As the Socialist Party met in national convention in Cleveland at the end of May 1936, the New York-based Old Guard, pilloried in the pages of Goldman’s *Socialist Appeal*, lost credibility and precipitated a split, a contingent of right wingers leaving the Party.²⁰⁵ This further Socialist fragmentation was the subject of intense scrutiny inside the Cannon-Shachtman camp of the Workers

202 Isaacs to Trotsky, 4 March 1936, Folder WP March 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936.

203 On the continuation of the Abern-Glotzer clique and the views of this contingent around entry see Gould [?] to Abern, 20 March 1936 and Abern to Glotzer, 24 March 1936, both in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 2, Files 2/3, in Folder WP: March 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936; Glotzer to Abern, 2 April 1936; Abern to Glotzer, 2 April 1936; Abern to Glotzer, 19 April 1936, all from Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 2, File 3, in Folder WP: April 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936.

204 “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 260–263; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 222–224; Myers, *Prophet’s Army*, 113–114; “Convention Resolutions: Adopted by 2nd National Convention of the Workers Party,” and “Resolution on Socialist Party,” *New Militant*, 7 March 1936; Workers Party, National Committee, Minutes, 3 March 1936; Workers Party, National Committee, Minutes, 3 March 1936; Workers Party, Political Committee, Minutes, 18 March 1936; 30 March 1936, Box 42, Folder 12, GB Papers.

205 Max Delson, “The New York Old Guard Answers the National Executive Committee” and

Party.²⁰⁶ Muste, in contrast, was preoccupied with the Goodyear rubber workers worsening situation in Akron, Ohio. He was now clearly a revolutionary fish out of the agitated water of Trotskyist party building. Muste was simply too radical for the Brookwood-trained organizers and Socialist Party militants on the payroll of John L. Lewis's CIO forces in Akron. They sent Muste packing from the Goodyear strike so they could settle the class struggle comfortably, Rose Pesotta reminding her old teacher that he had instilled in her a sense of ending strikes responsibly and honorably. This only exacerbated poor relations between Muste and those aligned with him, especially Abern, and Cannon and Shachtman, whose supposed failure to rise to his defense Muste attributed to a growing opportunistic Trotskyist appetite to pander to the CIO mainstream. Abern claimed in private correspondence with Glotzer that Cannon, Shachtman, and Swabeck suppressed articles on Akron, including two by Muste himself. The old AWP head remained unhappy with the decision to enter the Socialist Party, although he would indeed follow the Workers Party's course, and was advertised, alongside Cannon and Shachtman, as a public speaker heralding the new entry. Yet Muste was increasingly disaffected, and would later claim that the WP entry was an unethical and cynical turn into the Norman Thomas-headed Party. Expected to participate in what the former reverend regarded as the disruptive sowing of the seeds of dissension within a body regarded by Workers Party revolutionaries as fundamentally centrist and reformist, A.J. was not in a good place. He was worn down physically, reduced to penury, and obviously alienated from Cannon and Shachtman, now clearly hegemonic within the Workers Party leadership. This commanding duo was still at loggerheads with Muste over trade union issues and with Glotzer around how to work with YPSL militants. In retrospect, it is difficult not to conclude that the former pacifist preacher was ripe for a reassessment of what a sympathetic biographer would later label his "detour to the left."²⁰⁷

Ernest Eber, "The Significance of the Struggle Between the Yipsels and the Old Guard of New York," *Socialist Appeal*, 1 (June – July 1935), 6–11 and 14–18.

206 Cannon received extensive reports on the Cleveland Conference from James Burnham (James West). See, for instance, Burnham to Cannon, 23 May 1936 (Saturday); Burnham to Cannon, 24 May 1936, Sunday, Folder WP: May 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936.

207 Ross, *The Socialist Party of America*, 369–371; John West [Burnham] and Max Shachtman, "Day to Day Report of S.P. Convention at Cleveland, Ohio," *New Militant*, 30 May 1936; A.J. Muste, "The Problem in Akron," *New Militant*, 30 May 1936; "Why We are Joining the Socialist Party," [Advertisement for Irving Plaza meeting, chaired by Max Shachtman, with speakers James P. Cannon and A.J. Muste], *New Militant*, 6 June 1936; Rose Pesotta, *Bread Upon the Waters* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1944), 225; Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 58–60; Muste, "My Experience in the Labor and Radical Struggles of the Thirties,"

Long-time comrades and friends sensed Muste's "strained and straightened state," taking up a collection to send A.J. and his wife Anna to Europe for what they insisted was a well-needed rest. It would be a working holiday, however, with Muste slotted to attend a Pre-Conference gathering of the International Communist League and to confer closely with Trotsky. The collection to sustain Muste's European sojourn apparently "overflowed with contributions from people who hated Musteism but loved Muste." Muste was to go with the support of the Cannon-Shachtman majority, although this approval was not granted without some misgivings. Cannon let Trotsky know in mid-May 1936 that "the stubborn opposition of Muste to our tactical turn was deeply rooted in conceptions of the movement to which he still retains to a considerable degree. While he has accepted the convention decision in a disciplined manner, it appears to us that he is still far from understanding the tactic in our sense." Ten days later, Burnham, reporting to Cannon from the Socialist Party Cleveland Convention, expressed concern that Muste, Spector, and Glotzer were up to no good, muddying the waters of entryism. "We shall have to decide soon on the course we shall follow with these people (including this trip of Muste)," Burnham concluded.²⁰⁸

Nothing, in the end, was done to address Muste's trans-Atlantic trip, and his stature as a representative of the Workers Party and its nascent entry into the Socialist Party. Yet much of Cannon's and Burnham's concerns would prove justified. As the Mustes boarded an ocean liner at a Hoboken pier, the scrawny agitator raised his arm in "the clenched fist salute of bloody revolution." Yet the political substance of Muste's European meetings was largely given over to conveying to Trotsky and others "our whole story," as filtered through the views of himself, Abern, Spector, Gould, and Glotzer. If the discussions that took place between Trotsky and Muste in Oslo, Norway at the end of June were warm and cordial, they apparently did little to soften Muste's resistance to the French

in Simon, ed., *As We Saw the Thirties*, 141–142; Hentoff, ed., *Essays of A.J. Muste*, 164–167; Hentoff, *Peace Agitator*, 73–84; Glotzer to Trotsky, 22 May 1936, Roll 4, Reel 3347, MS Papers. Critique of Cannon and Shachtman with respect to Muste and the Akron strike appears in Abern to Glotzer, 23 April 1936, in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 2, File 3, Folder WP: April 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936.

208 Hentoff, *Peace Agitator*, 94–99; Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 61–68; Hentoff, ed., *Essays of A.J. Muste*, 207–214; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 263–264. Cannon's tentative support but questioning of Muste's European trip was voiced in Cannon to Braun [Trotsky], 13 May 1936 and Burnham's reservations in Burnham to Cannon, 23 May 1936 (Saturday); Burnham to Cannon, 24 May 1936 (Sunday), while discussion of the importance of the European Pre-Conference and Muste is in Abern to Glotzer, 13 May 1936, all in Folder WP: May 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936.

turn. Trotsky's attempts to placate Muste and keep him aligned with the Fourth International failed to move the former AWP head away from his convictions, a blend of antagonism to the Socialist Party's "poor quality" and "small numbers," opposition to entry, and personal antagonism to Cannon. He provided Trotsky with a private estimate of the Socialist Party's prospects, garnered from his attendance at the Cleveland convention, where Muste saw little to indicate that any stability could be achieved in the social democratic body, where the Militant leadership layer was particularly devoid of resolve and unworthy of the trust of revolutionaries. Trotsky, predictably, did not disagree, but he insisted that Muste stop trying to prove that entry had been a mistake, and concentrate instead on achieving what could be gained from the tactical turn, now that it was implemented. "Naturally, you are entitled to your revenge to prove to the party that your line was right and C-S wrong," Trotsky commiserated, adding with political punch, "but you must do that on the basis of the new experiences – not rehashing old arguments." But Muste seemed incapable of giving up the anti-Cannon ghost, waiting three hours one day to talk to Trotsky about his discontents, even going back to vent about "the deceitful, etc. fashion in which C planned the Oehler expulsion." Letting Trotsky know "with entire frankness my opinion as to C's inability to **build** a party, develop a healthy morale, etc.," Muste also "stated that I certainly could not **work in full confidence** with C." Trotsky countered that he was convinced, from Cannon's correspondence and actions as well as the reports of others, such as Isaacs, that the Kansas revolutionary was genuinely committed to working with Muste and all of those in the Workers Party dedicated to advancing revolutionary internationalism.

As Muste left Norway for Denmark, the Netherlands, and then Belgium, his meetings with dissident figures in the ICL, particularly those still opposed to the French turn, only hardened his inclinations toward resentment and refusal, although he remained, well into July 1936, convinced of the vigor of the revolutionary movement. But the wound of entryism festered. "The **opponents** of entry say that the same or greater gains would have been made without entry," he reported, "and how in hell are you going to decide, I ask?" At the Paris Pre-Conference, tasked with initiating preliminary discussions around the creation of the Fourth International and convening 26–31 July 1936, those Europeans with whom Muste was inclined to bloc in an anti-entry stand – Raymond Molinier in France, Hendrick Sneevliet of the Dutch Revolutionary Socialist Workers Party [RSAP], and Georges Veereken of Belgium – staked out ground that Shachtman (in attendance along with Muste as the two American observers) described as so scandalous and isolating that one of them was expelled. Muste, whom Shachtman characterized as given to "needless admonitions about the need of 'understanding' ... and 'proceeding intelligently,'" with

much comment on “shortcomings on both sides,” could not, in the end, find much to reconcile with among the European opponents of the French turn. This was a debilitating denouement for Muste’s tenure as a revolutionary Trotskyist.²⁰⁹

There were those who thought Muste had been alienated by his visit with Trotsky.²¹⁰ In any case, as Muste’s political responsibilities in Europe gave way to his holiday time, the old pacifist’s reflections turned increasingly pessimistic. He was convinced that “the labor and revolutionary movement had in so many places suffered defeat, and in others had come to an impasse,” failures reflecting “ethical and spiritual shortcomings.” Idealism and *élan* seemed in short supply in Trotskyist circles, while “factionalism and lack of confidence by the membership in the leadership and each other” was eating away at their “vitals.” With the world movement in disarray – Russia caught in the hard grip of Stalinist autocracy, Germany and Italy under the iron heel of fascism, Spain locked in internecine conflict, and preparations for war clearly underway almost everywhere – Muste vacationed in Paris. There, on a sightseeing excursion in and around the Left Bank, Muste entered the Church of St. Sulpice, experiencing a religious reconversion. He determined to leave the revolutionary left and rekindle his commitment to Christian, non-violent, anti-capitalist values, soon finding his way to the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and taking up the directorship of the Labor Temple of the Presbytery of New York.²¹¹

In a lengthy letter sent to friends and former comrades in the Workers Party, now designating themselves a “Club” because of their entry into the Socialist Party, Muste offered his resignation from the movement he spent the middle-1930s building. “War is the central problem of our day,” Muste declared, adding that “revolutionary Marxism itself contributes to the war danger,” for “to answer violence with violence at the present state of military techniques means the

209 The above paragraphs draw on a number of sources. See Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 61–68. Muste’s reports to his factional allies within the American Trotskyist milieu include a lengthy account of his meetings with Trotsky, simply headed “Copenhagen, Denmark,” [7 July 1936?] and Muste to Comrades, 17 July 1936, from Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 3, File 36, Folder WP: July 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936. On Shachtman’s preparations for and comments on the Paris Pre-Conference see Shachtman to Trotsky, 5 July 1936, Folder WP: July 1936; Shachtman to Trotsky, no date [August 1936]; Swabeck to Cannon, 13 August 1936, Folder WP: August 1–14 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936.

210 Myers, *Prophet’s Army*, 121, cites an interview with B.J. Widick to suggest this, although noting that, “The details remain a mystery.”

211 Hentoff, *Peace Agitator*, 94–99; Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*, 61–68; Hentoff, ed., *Essays of A.J. Muste*, 207–214; “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 263–264; Jo Ann Ooiman Robinson, “The Pharos of the East Side, 1937–1940: Labor Temple Under Direction of A.J. Muste,” *Journal of Presbyterian History*, 42 (Spring 1970), 18–37.

slaughter of the workers and the destruction of the aims of higher civilization.” For Muste, Marxism was now a “useful generalization, but nothing more. Scientific Socialism and the inevitability idea will never stir the masses.” What was needed was sacrifice and “sublime unselfishness,” and this, Muste was convinced, could only come through God. The ideals of communism were best achieved through spiritual, Christian, non-violent means, and capitalism stood condemned “for what it does to the capitalist as well as to the wage workers.” Indignation was justified, but could only be effectively channeled through realms in which “ethical and spiritual appeals are made,” with “morality and religion” upheld. “[W]ould Trotskyists have acted differently if they had won,” Muste mused with respect to what he referred to as “the Stalinist fall, yielding to temptation, degeneration.” Compelled to “resume an open and active connection with the Christian church,” Muste, an opponent of entryism, embarked on what he considered a higher calling, taking himself into what he now thought the true “reservoir of idealism.” Love, not the struggle of antagonistic class interests, took pride of place in Muste’s reconstructed world view:

Comradeship implies the concept that you are a ‘person’, an end in yourself, not a mere tool to serve some one else’s end. It involves equally the conception that your fellow-members are also ends in themselves and you are not entitled to use them merely as means. You must ‘love’ them ‘as you love yourself.’ ... [T]he conclusion from this demand for overcoming the self, merging no right to use as mere means, is drawn by all the greatest religious teachers: viz, that if any other being is an end even as you are, then there is no point at which you can draw a line; all men, then, are brothers, sons as it were of one father, members of the one great human community of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. This essentially religious pronouncement finds an answering ‘Yes’, I believe, in the inmost depths of every soul in the moments of deepest, purest – or if you please most direct and child-like insight. Between the bitterest foe and in the midst of the hottest struggle the common human bond will suddenly and somehow assert itself

On one grand level this was a rejection of the class struggle essence of revolutionary socialism, and on another, more specific and particularistic plane, it seemed a repudiation of the essence of entryism as a revolutionary activity.

The “Club” no doubt understood Muste’s 28 August 1936 resignation statement, penned in New York after his return from Europe, in this light. It wasted little time in expelling the former National Secretary. Within the Abern clique, private communications revealed worry that Muste’s defection “will of course

practically be to wipe out the influence of the former Muste-Abern group, discredit our past struggle, make it more difficult for us to get a hearing in the future." Abern thought Muste's last testament an "honest man's reversal of views, but wrong." In Minneapolis the response was more irreverent: some of the rough and rude teamster militants joked that perhaps they ought to repossess the suit of clothes they had generously bestowed on Muste during his speaking tour on behalf of the newly-fused Workers Party in 1935. They should have known better, Cannon later quipped: "Preachers never give anything back." Decades later, veterans in the American Trotskyist movement passed cheeky judgement on Muste: "He'd rather fight the devil than James P. Cannon."²¹²

12 Entryism & Subordination

With Muste's departure, Cannon and Shachtman had a relatively free reign inside what was now their Socialist Party caucus. How would entry work?

Matters were complicated considerably as conservative elements inside the Socialist Party embarked on a late 1935/early 1936 campaign to expel left-wingers in New York, necessitating cautions and delicacy with respect to how Trotskyist entry would be undertaken.²¹³ Cannon had not thought through just what was to be done. "Before joining the party and getting around the country to get a good look at it, I, like the others, was guessing to a large extent and

²¹² The above paragraphs draw on Hentoff, *Peace Agitator*, 98–101; Arne Swabeck to Comrades, 8 September 1936, with Summary of Muste Statement of Resignation, Roll 12 Reel 3355, MS Papers; Hansen, "The Abern Clique," 16; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 199; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 118–121. Muste's full statement of resignation is appended to Muste to Swabeck, 28 August 1936, with Abern's comment in Abern to Glotzer, 30 August 1936, Folder WP: 15–31 August 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936. The joke about Muste, Cannon, and the devil, was passed on to me by Jim Robertson. Cannon would retain regard for Muste, especially his contribution to the revolutionary movement in the 1934–36 years, regarding him as "a remarkable man who was always extremely interesting to me and for whom I always had the most friendly feelings." But if Cannon admired Muste's energy, sincerity, and devotion to his work, he could not quite absolve Muste of his shortcomings as a fundamentally religious man who chose, ultimately, a non-revolutionary course. For the positive Cannon assessment of Muste see Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 170–171.

²¹³ "From Our Viewpoint," and Ben Fischer, "The Question of the YPSL," *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (October 1935), 1, 4–6; "From Our Viewpoint," *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (November 1935), 1; "From Our Viewpoint: Old Guard Determined to Split Party on a National Scale," *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (January – February 1936), 1–2.

exaggerating the significance and influence of the New York centrist clique of Altman, Zam & Co,” he later confessed to Felix Morrow. On this provisional basis, Cannon, Shachtman, Swabeck, Burnham and others agreed that the entry would be a “double” one, in which the Workers Party entered *both* the Socialist Party and the Militant caucus. Joe Carter would later stress that this “double entry” had in actuality been Cannon’s “formula,” one that facilitated an approach to the Socialist Party’s New York membership, paving the way for national work and securing relations with the “Militant tops” so as to best “influence differentiation amongst them, prepar[ing] the way for a genuine Left wing in the country.” Cannon imagined such an orientation as an experiment rather than some kind of “natural law” that is operated forever, and as such the approach “would be subject to reconsideration on the basis of experience.”²¹⁴ How all of this would be enacted, and what price its main architects, Cannon and Shachtman, would be made to pay remained to be seen.

From the beginning, it was clear that entry was not going to be an easy process and that the Trotskyists would be forced to swallow many indignities. In mid-February 1936, Cannon wrote to Shachtman that negotiations with the Socialists who favored their entry were not going well. Better news came from Chicago, where Shachtman thought Norman Thomas increasingly open to entry. The bulk of local “Militants” and Yipsels “are decidedly in favor of our admittance” and were resisting ideological posturing against “the disruptive Trotskyists,” reported Shachtman. In New York, right-wing “Militants” were intent on limiting Trotskyist activity inside the Socialist Party, especially the publication of “non-official papers,” which Cannon feared could be banned. He encouraged Vincent Ray Dunne to work closely with the Socialist Party in Minnesota. By pressing the state organizer to write to Thomas and the National Office heralding the entry of Minneapolis’s pioneering Teamster leftists as a great thing, Cannon felt Dunne could give entry a much-needed boost. He also suggested that if Dunne could possibly secure a position as state organizer or state secretary of the SP “right off the bat” it might well establish Minnesota as a regional beachhead, from which the entryists could operate. “We will badly need at least one local or state organization under our control,” Cannon explained, “so that if we have trouble about the paper we can move it to Minneapolis for a time and publish it as an official organ there.” The existence of a Trotskyist publication inside the Socialist Party was, for Cannon, an absolute

214 Cannon to Morrow, 12 November 1936; Carter to Cannon, 15 November 1936; Cannon to Swabeck, 12 December 1936, Folders WP: 10–14 November 1936, WP: 15–30 November 1936 & 1–14 December 1936, PRL, Chrono File, November – December 1936.

necessity. Chicago's *Socialist Appeal* would prove to be a strong voice opposing remnants of the Old Guard within the SP, insisting that would-be Militants adopt forceful and national stands (rather than confining themselves to New York), and cultivating left-wing youth in the Young People's Socialist League. Cannon pressed Goldman to hold "on to the *Appeal* by all means until the question of the press is definitely settled. As a last resort, it is best to have it in reserve. I do not think it will come to this, but it is best to be prepared for all possible variants." In the New York negotiations with Socialist Party left wingers such as the ex-Communist/Lovestoneite, Herbert Zam, and the young "Militants" Murray Baron and Gus Tyler, Cannon stressed that were entry to take place "we want equal rights with all other members, no second class status, etc., that we will be obliged to retain our press, at least for a period of months after our entry in order to keep contact with our sympathizers and to carry them along with us." Granting a willingness to change the character of the *New Militant* so that it would not compete with one of the major Militant-controlled organs within the SP, *The Call*, making it over into something Cannon suggested might approximate Goldman's *Socialist Appeal* or even *The Nation*, "and combining the *New International* with it as a quarterly supplement," these concessions were never enough to appease the other side. "They appeared to be very much concerned about the press," Cannon wrote to Shachtman wearily, noting that if Trotskyist publications were to be sacrificed upon entry "it would be suicidal for us to break off short and leave our sympathizers in the air to be alienated and disoriented by the Oehlerites and similar movements." Beyond the crucial issue of the press, Cannon was also exercised that the Militants seemed to want entry to be premised on the Trotskyists coming into the Socialist Party as part of the Militant caucus, subject to its discipline but allowed to contend for their point of view, a condition Burnham was apparently willing to accept. Cannon preferred "to operate with the Militants as a co-operating left-wing bloc," and was "dubious about ... fall[ing] into an organizational mechanism which tends to blur over differences."²¹⁵

215 Cannon to Shachtman, 14 February 1936; Cannon to Dunne, 10 February 1936; Cannon to Goldman, 26 February 1936; Shachtman to Cannon/Cannon to Shachtman, 17 February 1936; Box 3, Folder 8/Reel 3, JPC Papers. See also Isaacs to Trotsky, 25 March 1936, Folder WP: March 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936; Glotzer to Trotsky, 9 April 1936; Isaacs to Trotsky, 21 April 1936, Folder WP: April 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936. On the *Socialist Appeal*'s positions in subsequent months see Editorial, "The NEC Has Show its Colors; The Left-Wing Must Now Show Its," Haim Kanterovitch, "Notes on the 'Peace Agreement' Between the NEC and the New York State Committee," Melos Most, "Militancy Comes of Age in the YPSL," and Ernest Erber, "The Yipsel Convention," *Socialist Appeal*, 1 (August – September 1935), 1–6, 10–18.

As to the timing of the entry, this too became contentious. Cannon's and Shachtman's preference to move quickly, reinforced by Trotsky's January 1936 advice to "not give the centrist leadership any time to allow for the possibility of consolidation," ran into the fears of their Socialist Party supporters. The Militant group worried that if such an entry was effected before the New York primaries in April and the Cleveland Convention of the Party in May, it would stampede registered voters and fence-sitters, galvanizing opposition to the now Militant-aligned Norman Thomas and feed into the ideological project of the entrenched Old Guard. "In brief," Cannon reported, "**they are afraid**, and I am convinced, sincerely so." Knowing that postponement of the Workers Party convention, and thus delay of the decision on entry that would be reached at it, was impossible, Cannon proposed that once entry was formally endorsed by the WP, the public announcement of this could come in the form of "an innocuous resolution" that endorsed study of the Socialist Party and observation of what developed out of its May Convention. Local Workers Party groups around the country would then be free to "enter the SP quietly," the initiative to be undertaken slowly, cautiously, and in stages. This, Cannon thought, would "not force matters unduly or place the Militants in a compromising position which would endanger their internal position, as long as they show a co-operative attitude toward us and make an explicit agreement for our entry." To this end, Cannon wrote to a Californian comrade, urging him to prepare his Bay Area branch for entry: "An overwhelming majority of the convention delegates stand instructed to support the entry. The convention itself will only formally ratify the decision already made by the party membership. Immediately after that will come the action of the party. The comrades must be ready for this and they must be ready to enter the S.P. with the object of carrying on serious political work there in a responsible and disciplined manner. Otherwise, their entry ... will be a fruitless gesture." Optimistic that California "offers exceptional opportunities for our work in the S.P.," Cannon stressed on the eve of entry that, "we are united by a whole system of ideas which have been put to the test in a worldwide struggle ... concerned with the greatest historical events."²¹⁶

216 Trotsky to Cannon and Shachtman, 24 January 1936, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1935–1936]*, 252; Shachtman to Cannon/Cannon to Shachtman, 17 February 1936; Cannon to Mayes, no date [response to 10 February 1936 communication]; Cannon to Dunne, 17 February 1936; Cannon to Everett, 26 February 1936, Box 3, Folder 8, Reel 3, JPC Papers. Cannon's proposals as to how to make the entry without undue political rocking of the "Militant caucus" boat were congruent with Trotsky's later advice on how to function most effectively, at first, through "quiet" practices, although Venkataramani, as is consistent with his orientation, presents Trotsky as sending "detailed instructions" to Cannon and Shachtman. See Trotsky to Cannon, "How to Work in the SP," 9 March 1936, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1935–1936]*,

This coherence registered even before the Cleveland convention of the Socialist Party. With Cannon urging his caucus to prepare for entry and be ready to proceed upon ratification at the March convention, WP branches, after months of internal discussion around the question, were eager to embark on the new turn. "It is not our policy to bring the issue of entry before the s.p. organization anywhere formally," Cannon wrote to Edward Everett at the end of February 1936. "Everywhere, we are operating unofficially with the militant caucus, with the object of effecting entry in the quickest and quietest manner." Even before the Workers Party ratified entry, then, Cannonists across the country were engaged in significant movement into the Socialist Party. In Salt Lake City, where there was no SP local although the 1932 Presidential election had seen 1300 Socialist votes cast; the Workers Party proposed becoming the local and setting "the entire tone of the party." Cannon received word that it would all be, "Easy sliding with no opposition as yet, and most probably with correct activity, there will be none." One disciplined Trotskyist could make a significant impact, with Arizona being an example: a solitary comrade joined the SP Phoenix local, reviving it and making contacts with Socialists in Bisbee and Douglas. In California, entryism was established and developing favorably in Los Angeles, Fresno, and Oakland. Rose Karsner wrote to Jim from Los Angeles in mid-April 1936, letting him know that the "Militant" group, after much pressure from Edward Everett and Charles Curtiss, had "finally agreed to take us all in before the convention."²¹⁷

Cannon wrote to Glotzer 9 April 1936 to let him know that, "Inside the YPSL we constitute a new force and create a new situation," urging him to "not form any fixed judgements until we see how things shape up on the new basis." At this point, Cannon noted that "about two-thirds of our comrades are already inside the s.p. Practically all of the Spartacans have entered. In New York the entry of the Spartacans is being completed this week." Even the politically-motivated distortions appearing in some social democratic publications tended to highlight entryism's success, with an article in the *Forward* apparently suggesting that "the Trotskyites" had captured the Illinois State convention of the Socialist Party, this "gross exaggeration" being conveyed to Cannon from Chicago. Goldman's *Socialist Appeal* was now being sustained by a steering

267–269; Venkataramani, "Leon Trotsky's Adventure in American Radical Politics, 1935–1937," 8–9.

217 Cannon to Everett, 26 February 1936; [Joe Hansen] to JPC and California Comrades, 2 March 1936; Cannon to Glotzer, 9 April 1936; Rose to Jim, 15 April 1936; Secretary of the Chicago Steering Committee to Cannon, 20 April 1936; 26 April 1936; 30 April 1936; Cannon to Glotzer, 12 May 1936, Box 3, Folder 8/Reel 3, JPC Papers.

committee of Workers Party entryists, and while, on balance, opposition to Trotskyism was being kept in check inside the Socialist Party the rituals of admission slowed the progress of entry, particularly with respect to youth joining the Yipsels. Nonetheless, by mid-May, with the SP Convention in Cleveland approaching, Cannon could write to a somewhat unenthusiastic Glotzer that, in spite of setbacks on the issue of the press, with it looking likely that the *New Militant* and the *New International* would have to cease publication, leaving the *Appeal* as the sole voice of Trotskyism inside the Socialist Party, entry was “virtually complete.” Cannon was receiving “very good reports from all over the country,” and “our comrades are making astonishing headway already.”²¹⁸

In a personal letter to Trotsky, sent through an ICL functionary, Erwin Wolf [Nicolle Braun], Cannon relayed information about the entry as of mid-May 1936. “The entry is now virtually completed in all parts of the country outside of New York. Our youth members are now all inside the Youth Socialist organization. In New York about one-third of the membership as well as all of the leadership remains outside.” Finally, according to Cannon, “the opposition to the entry has been almost completely eliminated,” although Muste and Abern were resisting what all others in the New York leadership considered necessary and inevitable concessions to the Socialist Party “Militants” and their demands that both the *New Militant* and the *New International* would have to cease publication. Cannon explained that this did not mean that the Trotskyist forces would be without a press. Plans were in the works to turn Goldman’s *Socialist Appeal*, an “organ of our tendency,” into a weekly, and discussions were underway with Minneapolis comrades, who already controlled the Socialist Party organization in their city, about publishing the *New International* from that home base. Compromises of this kind, Cannon insisted, were made to insure that the entry could be made “and in the real essence of the matter we are not giving up anything. We will have a press and full freedom of expression, even if under another name and with another place of publication.”²¹⁹

218 Cannon to Glotzer, 9 April 1936; Cannon to Glotzer, 12 May 1936; Secretary of the Chicago Steering Committee to Cannon, 20 April 1936; 26 April 1936; 30 April 1936. Box 3, Folder 8/Reel 3, JPC Papers. Glotzer remained unconvinced, writing a letter of complaint to Trotsky expressing legitimate concerns about the ephemeral nature of the SP’s so-called Militant Caucus, which he insisted had little actual presence in the Party outside of New York. He also condemned the foot-dragging of leading comrades in New York, whom he accused of an unwillingness to build a left-wing inside the Socialist Party, condemning in particular Shachtman’s role of cozying up to the SP hierarchy in a recent Unemployed Unity Convention. Glotzer to Trotsky, 22 May 1936, Roll 4, Reel 3347, MS Papers.

219 Cannon to Braun, 13 May 1936 [sleeve of correspondence, 1936–1937, originals and photocopies, in possession of the author].

If the actual entry was thus largely completed by late spring/early summer 1936, negotiations and relations with the Militant leadership impressed upon Cannon that this centrist contingent was committed, not to a revolutionary transformation of the Socialist Party, but to a politics of containment insulating the party against the formation of any genuinely left wing current. As Cannon would later note, the humiliating process of subordinating themselves before the Militants and their onerous demands was proof enough that the Trotskyist entry's success would come, not through the centrist leadership of the Socialist Party, ensconced in New York, but against them. In particular, the forceful pressure on the Workers Party to give up its press, only convinced Cannon all the more that independent, agitational and theoretical revolutionary organs, established on a stable weekly and monthly basis, would be crucial to entry's success in galvanizing a rank-and-file Socialist Party left wing and splitting it from layers of Party officialdom, whatever their seeming leftist inclinations. Cannon would thus quickly come to the conclusion, while participating in the last New York negotiations with the SP's Militant caucus sometime in May – June 1936, that the “experience” of entry was rich in lessons on how the actual French turn should thereafter be conducted. Months later he would list these lessons in a lengthy letter to Felix Morrow:

1. The centrist leadership in New York is the crystalized center of the anti-revolutionary current in the party.
2. The advancement of the revolutionary wing of the party will be accomplished not in collaboration with them, but in relentless struggle against them.
3. The New York leadership is without authority or influence in the rank and file of the genuine left wing of the party; rather they are held in deserved contempt for their double-dealing policy and outright treachery to the revolutionary program.
4. The most important task of all is the establishment of the revolutionary socialist press – a weekly agitational paper and a monthly theoretical organ supplementing the other.

This view of the entrism path was destined to separate Cannon out, acrimoniously so, from his counterparts in the New York leadership of the former Workers Party. They remained convinced that, in Swaback's later words, entry must be premised on “plowing through the general Militant grouping as representing the forces offering the most immediate possibilities.” Concentrated in New York, these SP Militants were, in Swaback's view, “the most important section of the Party,” and “Unless we crack this section and solve the problems here we shall not develop very far in the Party.” Cannon soon saw things differently, claiming relentlessly and audaciously that “the strategy of the Bolsheviks

is clearly indicated and as simple as ABC: get busy in the branches with the practical work of the party. Establish good relations of co-operation with the left wing socialists who mean it earnestly and do not play with ideas like the impotent phrase-mongers who parade as left wing leaders in New York; and first and last mobilize all forces to circulate and support the revolutionary press – the weekly, the monthly, and the pamphlets.” Cannon thus altered his views about how to conduct the SP entry “when the centrists not only compelled us to suspend the *Militant* and the *New International* but tied up the question of our entry into the caucus with the proposal that we support a new centrist internal paper in place of the *Appeal*.” To Vincent Ray Dunne, he explained, “I changed my mind. The price was too high!” And to Morrow he joked, “I am sure that if you report this to my dear friend, Dr. Tropp, he will issue a doctor’s order that the new centrist paper must not be mentioned to me any more.”²²⁰

One of the places where entry proceeded early in the process exceptionally well was California. Rose was settled in Los Angeles, doing her best to recuperate from health problems, but required as well to attend to a sick friend/relative. She was about to join the Socialist Party alongside other comrades, with whom she was interacting and attending political events like a Norman Thomas-Upton Sinclair debate. She wrote to Jim outlining how she had made inquiries about an extra room for Jim to work in, calculating that they could make ends meet quite economically “on \$15 a week – food for both, rent, your incidental expenses, such as smokes & papers, nothing else, and pay the loan from here too at \$10 a month ... the only problem then remaining would be a job when you return.” Always impoverished, the Cannon-Karsner household was obviously in a period of reconfiguration. Rose, the domestic manager, was perhaps

220 Cannon to Morrow, 12 November 1936; Swabeck to Dunne, 10 November 1936; Swabeck to Glotzer, 13 November 1936, in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 4, File 13; Cannon to Swabeck, 12 December 1936, all in Folders WP: 10–14 November 1936 & WP: 1–14 December 1936, PRL, Chrono File, November – December 1936. Cannon was not pleased when contacted by Herbert Zam in mid-December 1936, to sit on the editorial board and contribute to “an inner Party Left Wing organ,” published out of New York and conceived as “national in its scope.” The New York center, clearly defensive, responded to Zam’s initiative writing to Cannon and Dunne, insisting that they did not know on whose authority Zam was acting as there was no clearly constituted left wing within the SP, but rather several left wing groupings. Moreover, Zam’s proposal seemed a transparent attempt to undercut the *Socialist Appeal*. Cannon and Dunne were assured that their comrades in New York refused to go along with “the arbitrary and bureaucratic method of setting up a self constituted left wing,” one that would also be a conscious move to “bridge the gap between the right and the left centrists and to steer its course against the genuine left wing.” See Zam to Cannon, 15 December 1936; [Swabeck?] to Cannon and Dunne, 18 December 1936, Folder WP: 15–31 December 1936, PRL, Chrono File, November – December 1936.

trying to reconsolidate things on some kind of manageable footing, melding the political and the personal and possibly working on weaning Jim away from New York and some of its ill effects on his health. These were aggravated by his bad habits, the “nothing else” in Rose’s calculations obviously an admonition about certain indulgences. Political correspondence from this period indicated that Cannon’s recurring health problems, evident since the summer of 1935, were worsening, and Burnham noted in one May 1936 letter, “I hate to upset your nervous system with this sort of thing.” The Workers Party wanted Cannon to travel to Europe for a June ICL meeting, but Cannon begged off, explaining to Trotsky that such a trip was “utterly out of the question,” citing the “pressing immediate problems raised by the entry into the SP.” Rose concluded a California letter to her partner with a view to extricating him from the New York scene: “I am quite happy here, and hope the novelty does not wear off. Just now I feel as tho I wish we could settle here for **good**. Could the center spare you? Love, Rose.”²²¹

The lure of California for Cannon would be an important consideration in the near future, but over the course of April and May the somewhat clandestine entry of the Workers Party into the Socialist Party proceeded, with all eyes on the Cleveland Convention, opening 23 May 1936.²²² Controversy and contention wracked the Socialist Party gathering from the opening day, with the Old Guard defiant but clearly on the defensive. In the words of one critical commentary, the “muddleheaded Militants” gravitated too often to compromise positions. Two delegations from New York – Militants vs Old Guard – demanded to be seated, and with the Militants victorious the more bellicose of the right wing walked out and formed a new Social Democratic Federation. In what followed, a confusing swirl of electoral platforms for the 1936 Presidential election clashed, with behind the scenes maneuvers congealing the different tendencies. Norman Thomas emerged victorious, placating what remained of the right, led by Louis Waldman; aligned now with the Militants, then with a contingent of municipal socialists led by former Milwaukee mayor, Daniel Hoan, yet further entangled with his past ally in the League for Industrial Democracy, Harry Laidler. The Cannon-Muste-Goldman forces were present at the Cleve-

²²¹ Rose to Jim, 15 April 1936; Burnham to Cannon, 7 August 1936, Box 3, Folder 8/Reel 3, JPC Papers; Burnham to Cannon, 24 May 1936; Cannon to Braun, 13 May 1936 [sleeve of correspondence, 1936–37]; “From Our Viewpoint: Before the Cleveland Convention,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (April – May 1936), 1.

²²² Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 231–232, suggests that the entry of individual Workers Party members took place *after* the Socialist Party’s Cleveland convention in May 1936. Obviously there were significant entry initiatives *before* this.

land Convention, but their voice in the proceedings was muted, a reflection of the extent to which entry was being orchestrated in a quiet, almost clandestine, manner, through which the Socialist subordination of the Trotskyists might be best accomplished.²²³

Goldman did his best to get the Appeal Platform, described in the *New Militant* as “a document of militant class struggle, thoroughly imbued with vigorous revolutionary spirit,” before the convention, but the “Militant caucus” mustered its forces to suppress the statement. The Platform assailed the failures of Roosevelt, declared that the road to socialism ran through the destruction of capitalism and the establishment of a workers’ state, and advanced the necessity of embracing and struggling for specific immediate causes. Among them were the 30-hour workweek with no reduction in pay; unemployment insurance; old age pensions; public works projects at union wages; defense of workers’ and democratic rights; full social and economic equality for Negroes and the “smashing of Jim Crow”; and no support for the military aims of the state.²²⁴

13 A Farmer-Labor Detour and the Return of the Oehlerite Repressed

Minneapolis’s revolutionary teamsters sent two delegates to the Cleveland Conference, armed with 700 copies of a resolution on the Farmer-Labor Party [FLP], which detailed how that organization had historically undermined the struggle for socialism in the Midwest. Situating the origins of farmer-laborism in the 1920s, when “just the sort of militant workers who are assembled in this convention” built the FLP, only to face betrayals and broken promises, the Minneapolis statement insisted that their experience “proves that for Socialists to assist in building a Farmer-Labor party only weakens the Socialist Party and misleads and confuses the workers who are seeking the way out of their misery and oppression.” This, however, did not close the door totally on how revolutionaries might work within farmer-laborist circles. The Minneapolis document insisted that, in specific circumstances, “Socialists must find the path to work with such a party in order to show its supporters the only road that will

223 John West and Max Shachtman, “Day to Day Report of the S.P. Convention at Cleveland, Ohio,” *New Militant*, 30 May 1936; Burnham to Cannon, 23–24 May 1936 [sleeve of correspondence, 1936–37]; Ross, *The Socialist Party of America*, 371–372; Shannon, *Socialist Party of America*, 243–246.

224 “Proposal for a Socialist Party Election Platform for 1936,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (June 1936), 3–5.

lead to the satisfaction of their needs, to their emancipation." Defeated amid cries of "sectarianism" and "isolation," the Minneapolis resolution nonetheless exposed the pitfalls associated with revolutionaries confronting reformist political formations to which countless militant workers were committed.²²⁵

The Minneapolis resolution on the Farmer-Labor Party exposed a possible contradiction between the programmatic approach of the Workers Party Trotskyists to the long-contentious issue of farmer-laborism and revolutionary politics in the United States and the actual practice of relating to such a third-party movement. For while the statement was undoubtedly critical, the practice of the Minneapolis Trotskyists with respect to farmer-laborism on the state level had evolved into something different than the Workers Party's national policies suggested. The activities of the Minneapolis Trotskyists constituted, in effect, a case of local "exceptionalism" that flew somewhat in the face of the resolution brought to the Socialist Party convention. Minnesota's FLP, as historian David A. Shannon long ago noted, was one of the few state parties in which the trade unions were especially active, and this meant that both the Socialist Party and the Minneapolis Trotskyists who pioneered the Teamster strike victories of 1934 necessarily worked in the Farmer-Labor milieu, their paths crossing, often intimately, with FLP activists. As much as the left-wing inside the Socialist Party deplored the national FLP as little more than a "bourgeois liberal party," and the Minneapolis militants had extensive experience with the strike-breaking treachery of farmer-laborite politicians such as Governors Floyd Olson and Elmer Benson and Mayor Thomas Latimer, it was difficult to wash one's political hands entirely of the FLP. The Socialist Party, for instance, agreed to back FLP candidates in Minnesota in the 1932 election as long as the Party did not endorse candidates for national office running on the ticket of either of the two major bourgeois parties. Even as right-wing support within the Minnesota FLP mounted to back Roosevelt, leftists beat down this endorsement mobilization, and the Socialists continued their SP electoral support. As an unpublished thesis by N. Dylan Boorman documents convincingly, Minneapolis Trotskyists moved from a principled stand of distanced criticism of Minnesota farmer-

225 "Statement of Minnesota S.P. on Farmer Labor Party Question," *New Militant*, 30 May 1936; Carl Pemble, "The Cleveland Convention," *The Militant Socialist*, 1 (July 1936), 2-3, Socialist Workers Party Records, cited in N. Dylan Boorman, "American Trotskyism and the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party From Origins to 1936," MA thesis, San Francisco State, 2017; Revolutionary Workers League, "The Socialist Party Moves to the Right," 7pp. typescript, Roll 13, Reel 3356, MS Papers; Burnham to Cannon, 23 May 1936/24 May 1936 [sleeve of correspondence, 1936-37]; Ross, *The Socialist Party of America*, 371-372; Shannon, *Socialist Party of America*, 243-246.

laborism as an electoral expression of class collaboration, evident throughout the early 1930s and continuing into the 1934 General Drivers' strikes, into a more openly supportive, albeit critical, relationship with the FLP in 1935–36.²²⁶

Minneapolis Trotskyists such as Vincent Ray Dunne worked intimately and productively with FLP advocates Bill Brown and Mrs. Alfred Carlson. These local revolutionaries necessarily relied on support from such FLPer and the wide circle of allies they could mobilize on behalf of the beleaguered International Brotherhood of Teamsters Local 574, under constant attack from both IBT head Daniel Tobin and AFL President William Green. Dunne and other Minneapolis Trotskyists depended on their friendly connections with local Minneapolis trade unionists in the mainstream Central Labor Union for backing against the assault of red-baiting and threats to their leadership from distant officialdoms of organized labor. The bulk of these local workers' leaders lined up with the Minnesota Farmer Labor Party. All of this was reflected, as Boorman documents, in the Trotskyist controlled *Northwest Organizer*, which increasingly depicted the FLP as a party to which the workers looked, acknowledging that it helped to implement demands of the trade unions and other workers' organizations. The Trotskyist-controlled voice of militant Minneapolis labor ran editorial statements urging workers to vote for whatever "political movement most closely represents" their interests, using collective influence to mold the FLP into a weapon to "fight in the interests of the exploited." If farmer-laborism was not yet an unambiguous expression of class interests, it was at least "a political party to which labor unions are directly affiliated." At election time, the *New Militant* thus called on the workers of Minneapolis to elect "the Farmer-Laborites to office **but watch their every move, do not trust them.**"²²⁷

226 Shannon, *Socialist Party of America*, 221–222; Boorman, "American Trotskyism and the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party from Origins to 1936." Albert Goldman, "Labor Party Confusion," *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (April – May 1936), 5, struck a note of caution on labor parties and the 1936 election: "by conducting an independent campaign all over the country, [the sp] has a great opportunity to strengthen itself in numbers and morale. To play around with Labor Tickets or with local Labor Parties will in the vast majority of cases do great damage to the party."

227 See "The Worker Voter," *Northwest Organizer*, 26 August 1936; "The Labor Vote," *Northwest Organizer*, 15 October 1936, both quoted in Kristoffer O. Smemo, "The Politics of Labor Militancy in Minneapolis, 1934–1938," MA thesis, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2011, 83; Boorman, "American Trotskyism and the Farmer-Labor Party," esp. 80–157, quoting "W.P. Supports Election Battle Against Minneapolis Reactionaries," *New Militant*, 18 May 1935.

By January 1936, as Cannon and others made their organizational turn into the Socialist Party, private correspondence between Cannon and Vincent Ray Dunne addressed farmer-laborism. Cannon stressed to Dunne that while old positions against organizing a “reformist party where none exists” should certainly be adhered to, “where a labor party exists with roots in the trade unions, we have to join it. ... Our struggle within an established labor party ought to be concentrated on the questions of policy and action, rather than on the question of the party itself.” Suggesting that the Minneapolis comrades needed to discuss the issue and not be “put in a pocket on the question of the Farmer-Labor Party in Minn,” Cannon was adamant that “we should be inside. This will certainly hold doubly when we become part of the S.P.” Well aware that Minnesota was not the FLP norm, Cannon indicated that Dunne should not allow debate to turn only on the national orientation of farmer-laborism, but rather to acknowledge “exceptions for localities where bona fide labor parties actually exist.” Whether the FLP in Minnesota was indeed such a bona fide labor party, and whether Cannon and Dunne were actually discussing an entry into the Farmer Labor Party, as opposed to merely finding a way “to work inside the Farmer-Labor Party whether they join the SP or not,” as Cannon wrote to Chicago critic Francis Heisler, was something of an open question:

The entire trade union movement is in the FLP; in the industrial centers of the state it is in fact the base of the party. We can not leap over such a movement. It is not quite clear whether we shall work inside the FLP as an affiliated party or through the affiliation of the unions under our influence. But in any case, we must at least experiment with a period of systematic work inside the organization.

Cannon hammered home to Heisler that once “such a body comes into existence and acquires a firm basis of trade union support, it is necessary to experiment and test out the possibility of fruitful revolutionary work within it.” Confident that Workers Party comrades had the resolve to carry out this kind of activity without succumbing to the dubious politics of the environment they were compelled to work within, Cannon was clearly promoting activity done in and through the FLP, with Dunne very much on side. The latter indicated in a 3 February 1936 letter to Cannon that the Minneapolis comrades were in fact already “doing some work inside the Farmer-Labor Party, and will unquestionably find it necessary to increase and supplement this activity.” For Dunne, this was all necessary, both from the trade union point of view and also mandatory as an “indictment of the C.P. position.” Yet Dunne was also adamant, in October 1936, that not only were the Minneapolis Trotskyists swimming against the

tide in being “critical of Roosevelt,” but they were “doubly critical of the Farmer-Labor Party.”²²⁸

This was a politics that could easily lend itself to confusion and that would, in February 1937, reveal its downside in a bloc inside the Minnesota FLP of conservative, AFL-affiliated, trade unionists; rightist-leaning farmer-laborites; and Trotskyists. This unholy alliance united against a Communist Party initiative to thwart the nomination of incumbent mayor, Thomas Latimer, as part of

228 Cannon to Dunne, 28 January 1936, Socialist Workers Party Records; and Cannon to Heisler, 30 January 1936; Dunne to Cannon, 3 February 1936; and Heisler to Cannon, 12 February 1936, all in JPC Papers, all of this correspondence quoted in Boorman, “American Trotskyism and the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party,” 146–147. Boorman designates Trotskyist work inside the Minnesota FLP an entry, although he acknowledges that evidence of this entry is “frustratingly murky.” My own view is that no such entry occurred, for the Trotskyist forces, organized in the Workers Party, did not formally conduct an entry into the FLP. Rather, the Trotskyists and others (such as Bill Brown, a longtime FLPer) in Local 574 insisted on their right to work inside the FLP, especially in the face of a concerted effort on the part of red-baiting AFL trade union bureaucrats to expel the Trotskyist-led local and other union allies. Boorman notes that at the October 1935 Plenum the Workers Party adopted the resolution, “Building the American Section of the Fourth International,” in which stress was put on “mass work” and some kind of fraction work in the Socialist Party, but at this point a firm decision on actual entry into the SP had not been taken. In the resolution passed, reference was made to “general policy” and methods applied to the SP having “equal validity to local Labor or Farmer-Labor parties where the relationship of forces and the possibilities combine to offer advantages from such a tactic.” The Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota was specifically mentioned, and it was suggested that its internal differentiation might well necessitate “the energetic attention of our comrades in crystalizing a Left-wing group within the FLP which would force the struggle against the reformist bureaucrats to the break point.” Whether or not this assessment of the FLP was overstated or not, the fundamental question is whether crystalizing a left-wing inside a reformist organization constitutes an entry, and whether a union controlled by a Trotskyist leadership involving itself in such a party is the equivalent of entry. Boorman answers such questions positively, but I am less certain that characterizing the activities of the Minneapolis Trotskyists as an entry is warranted by the available evidence. See Boorman, “American Trotskyism and the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party,” esp. 142–144, 150–153. Note, as well, Vincent Ray Dunne, *An Open Letter to Governor Benson and the Farmer Labor Party* (New York: Socialist Workers Party, 1938) and Smemo, “The Politics of Labor Militancy in Minneapolis, 1934–1938,” 76, where the Trotskyist orientation to the FLP is presented as focusing on “trade union affiliates.” Dunne’s comments on criticism of the FLP are in Dunne to Cannon, 14 October 1936, Folder WP: October 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936. There were other critical communications, including Burnham (?) to Dunne, 13 November 1936, “General Organizational and Secretarial Correspondence, 1923–1956,” Boxes 15–16/Reels 20–21, JPC Papers. By 1938 Trotskyist criticism of the Farmer Labor Party was indicative of stronger stands. See, for instance, “F.L.P. Becomes Cog in Roosevelt Machine,” *Socialist Appeal*, 9 April 1938; “LaFollette Third Party Movement Would Check Workers’ Independence,” *Socialist Appeal*, 7 May 1938.

the FLP's Minneapolis municipal election slate. What was up for grabs was the nomination and endorsement of Latimer in the primary run-offs, determining who would be the candidate of choice for various political parties, including the Socialists and the Farmer Labor Party. The Stalinists opposed Latimer as a mayoralty candidate (although their preferred nominee, Kenneth C. Haycraft, had nothing to recommend him, from a class perspective, given his 1934 involvement in the National Guard and other issues) because of his role in unleashing police violence against picket line strikers in the summer of 1935, a condemnation the *Northwest Organizer* had itself put forward. Trotskyists found themselves in the unenviable position, for a time, of defending Latimer's nomination, accenting procedural reasons for white-washing his past acts of suppressing class struggle, doing so largely on the basis of knee-jerk opposition to Stalinist maneuverings. Eventually, the Minneapolis Trotskyists salvaged some credibility by insuring that Vincent Ray Dunne ran for mayor on the Socialist Party ticket, opposing both Latimer and Haycraft, but not before their entanglements with the Communist Party and the Farmer-Labor Party had run enough of a course to do them damage.²²⁹

229 Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 142–145; Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Politics* (New York: Monad, 1975), 92–97; Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Bureaucracy* (New York: Monad, 1977), 276–277; Boorman, “American Trotskyism and the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party,” 147–148; Smemo, “The Politics of Labor Militancy in Minneapolis,” 95–99; “Farmer-Labor Party Split as Trade Unionists Shake Off Grip of Adventurers,” *Northwest Organizer*, 18 March 1937; William Millikan, “The Red-Baiting of Kenneth C. Haycraft: A Minnesota All-American,” *Minnesota History*, 54 (Winter 1994), 170–187; George Dim Tselos, “The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s,” PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1970, 423–428. The Minneapolis mayoralty resulted in a Socialist Party Commission Inquiry, which largely exonerated the Socialist Party from any wrong stands taken in the nomination process, noting that “the Party as such had never officially endorsed the candidacy of Mr. Latimer, the present Mayor. Prominent members of the Party, as representatives of their respective trade unions, had participated in the so-called rump convention which nominated Latimer following a decision of the steering committee of the Minneapolis SP. It should, however, be pointed out that the party member selected to speak for the Socialist trade union groups made it clear at the convention that the Socialist Party reserved the right to nominate its own candidate or candidates for the primaries. The Party has to file the name of its candidate by April 20. It therefore decided at the meeting of April 15 to file papers for the candidacy of Comrade Dunne We desire later to suggest to the NEC a number of things regarding possible future relations between the Socialist Party and the Farmer Labor Party in Minneapolis and Minnesota.” Abern clarified to Glotzer that Dunne was to run in the primaries as an SP candidate and should Dunne not secure the nomination, the SP would be supporting “whoever was the FLP candidate.” Dunne regarded this report as vindicating “our policy to the ground,” the decision in the document “all ours.” See Dunne to Cannon, 23 April 1937; Abern to Glotzer,

Even if this eventual quagmire inside the FLP could not be entirely foreseen in 1936, the ousted Oehlerites sensed, a year before, that something was amiss. Indeed, discussions about the peculiarities and specificities of the Minneapolis Trotskyists' work within the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party had been pursued in a detailed way at various points in 1935, as Workers Party gatherings, such as the Pittsburgh conference of activists, addressed the growing and public involvement of Trotskyists affiliated with the Minneapolis Drivers' Union in the FLP. Skoglund reported on the issue for the National Committee at the embittered March 1935 Pittsburgh event. Cannon introduced a motion to allow the "Minneapolis branch to support FLP candidates in the municipal elections," but the Workers Party was to have no official affiliation with the Farmer-Labor Party and this special dispensation to support the Minnesota FLP's electoral bid "constitutes no precedent for future campaigns." The general policy of the WP was to "run its own candidates," and the Minneapolis branch was to issue a leaflet for mass distribution explaining "its position to the workers" and outlining that "the problems of the workers cannot be solved through any reformist party." Undoubtedly in part a consequence of Oehlerite pressure, the issue of Minnesota "exceptionalism" and the Farmer-Labor Party was thus associated with ultra-left, sectarian critiques of entryism from at least March 1935, but it also drew criticism from Goldman's *Socialist Appeal*.²³⁰ Not surprisingly, the Oehlerites were quick to condemn the role of the Workers Party in the Cleveland Socialist Party Convention. The Revolutionary Workers League attacked the Cannonist Workers Party entryists, whom they described as "completely passive and silent ... rapidly sinking into this quagmire of reformism and opportunism."²³¹

25 April 1937, in Folder WP: April 1937, PRL, Socialist Party Entry, Chrono File, January – October 1937; "Vincent Ray Dunne to Run for Mayor on Socialist Ticket" & "Minneapolis Cleared of CP Slander," *Labor Action*, 1 May 1937.

230 See, for instance, the account of the Pittsburgh conference, the Oehlerites, and the FLP in Boorman, "American Trotskyism and the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party," 85–87. Note as well Max Shachtman, "The Problem of the Labor Party," *New International*, 2 (March 1935), 33–37; "Farmer-Laborites Will Continue to Explore," *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (July 1936), 5–6.

231 Revolutionary Workers League, "The Socialist Party Moves to the Right," 7pp. typescript, Roll 13, Reel 3356, MS Papers.

14 Entry Proclaimed

Cannon and the National Committee of the Workers Party regarded the Ohio convention of the Socialist Party as heralding a new set of possibilities for American revolutionaries. It witnessed a “break with the Old Guard,” a split of great significance in the potential reconfiguration of the left. Amidst the confusions of the “Militants,” Cannon and his allies discerned an opening for bold interventions that would lead to gains for “proletarian revolution in the United States.” On 6 June 1936 the *New Militant*’s large-font headline proclaimed, “Workers Party Calls All Revolutionary Workers to Join the Socialist Party.”²³²

The French turn was taken in the United States. The ostensibly disbanding WP National Committee issued a statement that concluded: “We enter the Socialist party as we are, with our ideas. ... On the basis of equal duties and equal rights we obligate ourselves to work loyally and devotedly to build the Socialist Party into a powerful, united organization in the revolutionary struggle for socialism.” Denying that they were entering the SP as “a separate faction,” Cannon and others asked for “no special privileges.” The claim of factional innocence was disingenuous, and Trotskyist caucuses met bi-weekly in major centers, with the old Workers Party leadership intact, designated “the Club,” and instructing members across the country. But it must have been obvious to Thomas and others in the Socialist Party leadership, especially the “Militants” with whom Cannon, Shachtman, Burnham, and others had been “negotiating” for weeks, that the Trotskyists were not going to simply evaporate as a political tendency. The SP hierarchy did what it could, however, to insure that the entryists had as little in the way of platforms to operate on as was physically and politically possible. If Cannon and his comrades asked for no “special privileges,” it was largely because none had been offered: virtually anything that might be construed as desirable in this realm was denied. Forced to relinquish anything that would identify them as a coherent political contingent within the SP, the Workers Party entryists premised their joining the Socialists on the idealistic conviction that:

There is only one cure for the terrible blight of mental stultification which Stalinism and Old Guardism have brought into the labor movement: we must recapture and make a living part of the heritage of the revolutionary

²³² “Workers Party Calls All Revolutionary Workers to Join the Socialist Party,” and “Announcement,” *New Militant*, 6 June 1936.

movement, the Marxist principle that the free discussion of ideas is the only method whereby the proletarian vanguard can collectively hammer out the correct program that it needs if it is to work out the salvation of the human race.²³³

In the end, these ideas and the responsibility and discipline they demanded were essentially all that Cannon, Shachtman, and their supporters carried into the Socialist Party. Cannon largely, albeit reluctantly, accepted the demands of Zam and others on restricted independent press and caucus activity, seeing necessity as the mother of a certain inventiveness.²³⁴ Both Cannon and Shachtman were later adamant that the negotiations with the “Militants” constituted “a difficulty and sticky job, very disagreeable ... a long, involved, and tortuous process.” As Cannon wrote about a decade later, “It was rather irritating, but we were not deflected from our course by personal feelings.” Sidney Hook, now a Workers Party sympathizer, engaged in what Cannon claimed was one of his last acts on the revolutionary left. The philosopher prepared a brief that helped convince Norman Thomas to lean on the “Militants” so that they would endorse Trotskyist entry (an act the Socialist Party leader “was soon to rue”), and also arranged a meeting at his apartment between Cannon and Thomas, where some final details of the entry were hammered out. Shachtman grasped that the Thomas slogan of “an all-inclusive party” was something of a noose around the “Militant’s” collective neck, to be pulled taunt “if they tried to wriggle out of it by keeping us dancing attendance on them.” But if the Socialist Party “Militants” would eventually concede the right of entry, they would do so more in a manner meant to “humiliate” Cannon and Shachtman, “to make it appear that we were simply dissolving our party, humbly breaking with our past, and starting anew as pupils of the Militant caucus of the SP.” According to Shachtman,

233 Shachtman, “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 262–268; Myers, *Prophet’s Army*, 123. For the conduct of former Workers Party members in the Socialist Party, see West to Glotzer, 22 August 1936, at which point Burnham was still advising senior Trotskyists “to function and speak simply as left-wing Socialists, ... discourag[ing] the idea that there is any independent Trotskyite grouping,” a subterfuge that Glotzer’s subsequent lengthy report from Chicago exposed as obviously false. Glotzer to West, 2 September 1936, both communications in Roll 12, Reel 3355, MS Papers.

234 Cannon to Shachtman, 19 February 1936, Box 3, Folder 8/Reel 3, JPC Papers. In this letter Cannon noted that, “I have begun to change my mind after more thorough reflection,” conceding, for instance, that being in the same caucus with the “Militants” might allow for the patient educational work that would allow for the useful development of political clarity. He would later come to different conclusions.

the “Militant leaders ... wanted to sweep us under the rug.” Cannon chaffed at the imposed constraints:

They made very hard conditions. We had to give up our press, despite the fact that it had been the tradition of the Socialist Party to let any faction have its own press, and despite the fact that the Socialist *Call* had started as a factional organ of the ‘Militants’. Any section or state or local organization in the SP that wanted its own press had been free to have it. They demanded special conditions of us, that we should have no press. They made us give up *The Militant* and our magazine, the *New International*. They wouldn’t allow us the honor and dignity of joining as a body and being received as a body. No, we had to join as individuals, leaving every local Socialist Party branch the option of refusing to admit us. ... We received no welcome, no friendly salute, no notice in the press of the Socialist Party. Nothing was offered to us. Not one of the leaders of our party was offered so much as a post as branch organizer by these cheapskates – not one.

“It was a shabby business, the way they treated us,” Cannon later concluded, but entry had been secured, and in the process the now seemingly amorphous ranks of American Trotskyism actually consolidated, even as many made their way into a somewhat alien body.²³⁵

Cannon, Shachtman and others suspected the SP leadership might try to engineer some kind of “double-cross,” especially with respect to acceptance of well-known Workers Party leaders in New York. Yet, in spite of the obvious coherence of the Cannon forces inside the Socialist Party, the ways in which this political current functioned were more nuanced than a simple labelling of it as

235 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 224–226, 232; Shachtman, “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 262, 265–266, 270; Shachtman to Cannon/Cannon to Shachtman, 17 February 1936, Box 3, Folder 8/Reel 3, JPC Papers; Myers, *Prophet’s Army*, 113–115, 231, n. 22; Hook, *Out of Step*, 224; Fleischman, *Norman Thomas*, 170; Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook*, 145; Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 192–193; Venkataramani, “Leon Trotsky’s Adventure in American Radical Politics, 1935–1937,” 10. Morris Lewit recalled that one meeting between a “Militant Caucus” leader and Lewit, Cannon, and Shachtman was so distasteful to Cannon that he drank himself into a stupor before the get together, and Lewit and Shachtman had to spend a good deal of time pouring coffee into Cannon to sober him up so that the unity negotiations would be kept on track. See Paul Le Blanc and Michael Steven Smith, “Morris Lewit: Pioneer Leader of American Trotskyism (1903–1998),” in Paul Le Blanc and Thomas Barrett, eds., *Revolutionary Labor Socialist: The Life, Ideas, and Comrades of Frank Lovell* (Union City, NJ: Smyrna Press, 2000), 282.

a Trotskyist faction would suggest. Cannon genuinely wanted the disciplined and seasoned revolutionaries of the Workers Party to give themselves a certain breathing space in which to conduct their entry. Relations had to be allowed a chance to develop, and a prerequisite of winning the left wing in the Socialist Party to the politics of class struggle was demonstrating to new comrades that the Trotskyists could engage effectively in mass work. Formal caucuses seemed premature to Cannon at this time. He thus wrote to Glotzer:

In general we want to avoid any hard and fast combinations while exploiting every possibility for co-operation. In the first period of our work within the SP the most important thing of all is that we find an avenue to bring our point of view freely before the party. Relationships with individuals, or with groups, have to be considered from the point of view as to how they facilitate or retard this aim. Anything like serious factional combinations have to be avoided. Above all we should not be drawn in to any of the clique fights in the party or the YPSL.

Urging Glotzer not to overemphasize the dangers of entry and not to be diverted by a plethora of irritations, Cannon advised patience and avoidance of any “definite commitments.”²³⁶

In speech notes dated 12 June 1936, Cannon made the case for entry decisively, premising his remarks on the principle that, the “Most Important task is creation & development of the party,” and that “experience ... shows that the tactical road to the mass revolutionary party, the org forms, name – are not fixed or final.” Noting that American Trotskyists had weathered previous and difficult storms, defending “our principles” and remaining “steadfast in a long and cruel isolation,” Cannon was proud of having “stood up under a hail storm of abuse and slander and physical attack.” In entering the Socialist Party, he concluded, “we intend to defend our principles no less firmly in the future.” Keying on the Cleveland Convention’s anti-imperialist and anti-war sentiments, Cannon stressed how crucial it was, in 1936, to “arm the advanced workers with the ideas and teachings of Marx and Lenin,” to “show up the fraud of patriotism, ‘democracy,’ and ‘Americanism’ and the other catchwords to lure the

²³⁶ Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 231–232; Cannon to Glotzer, 12 May 1936, Box 3, Folder 9/Reel 4, JPC Papers. Cannon was concerned about Glotzer’s role in Chicago because he was clearly still in a combination with others who were less than enthusiastic about entry, and who were especially adamant that the press not be given up as a condition of entry. See Burnham to Cannon, 23 May 1936/24 May 1936 [sleeve of correspondence, 1936–37].

masses to their death in the bloody pit of imperialist war.” One task of the entryists would be to resolutely oppose “the labor bureaucracy, the Old Guard, the Stalinists – separated only by secondary differences – are fundamentally united – and are moving toward unity with the capitalist exploiters.” Conditions in the United States, Cannon insisted, were especially favorable, with the mass appeal of revolutionary politics growing. Entry accelerated this trend, but “the regeneration of the revolutionary movement required a coalescence of ... two currents. The revolutionists who had broken with the Comintern; The Left Socialists breaking with the reformist betrayals of Social Democracy.” To further this end Cannon embraced entry. He shored up the ranks of the now defunct Workers Party with his confidence in their capacity to hold firm to the principles and program of the budding Fourth International: “For the mark of the revolutionist,” Cannon wrote, “the highest and most pronounced quality of his character is the independence of opinion.” Cannon concluded that this would guide American Trotskyists in their entry into the Socialist Party.²³⁷

15 Cannon in California: The ‘Foot Loose Rebel’ and the Agitational Road

Entry formally secured, Cannon, obviously fatigued by the months of political turmoil and endless and often seemingly fruitless meetings with “Militants” for whom he had come to nurse deepening disrespect and distrust, needed a respite from New York. As he often had in the past, Cannon no doubt yearned for an escape from the center, and all that his presence there entailed. The agitational road was, for Cannon, a refresher in the politics of party building that took him away from the machinery of an organizational apparatus, and the necessity to keep its component parts functioning and synchronized. He thirsted for the mass mobilizations that were supposed to grow out of entryism. Such activity was, as well, far more conducive to improving his health than would be the close-quartered factional fighting that had been necessary in securing entry to the Socialist Party and defeating or neutralizing all manner of opponents, both inside the Workers Party and outside of it. Cannon was thus keen to leave New York, and apparently opted for this exit largely on his own accord, doing so with a minimum of organizational fuss. The Trotskyist

²³⁷ Cannon, Speech Notes, “Entry Speech,” 12 June 1936, Box 29, Folder 1–7/Reel 35, JPC Papers. On the Cleveland convention, see, as well, “The Cleveland Convention,” and “The Cleveland Resolution on War,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (July 1936), 1–3, 9–11.

Club's Political Committee apparently played less of a role in dispatching Cannon to California than did the domestic circumstances of Rose and Jim, which aligned with assignments. Hansen refers to Cannon's eventual arrival in California, circuitously routed through Minneapolis and Chicago, and originating undoubtedly in the best laid plans for Cannon to have a west coast respite and rest, as having happened "without the consent of the Abern clique." There was talk of Cannon travelling to California for a vacation to see Rose, and perhaps also to shore up the young entryists on the west coast with a regional tour. Close comrades in New York, such as Burnham, were unaware of just what was entailed in the trip, but it had to be put on hold because of a crisis in the Minneapolis branch, a pressing claim on Cannon that at least got him away from the center and half-way to California.²³⁸

At the time of the Socialist Party's May 1936 Convention, things took a turn for the worse in the Trotskyist-led General Drivers' Union. The war against Local 574 led by AFL head William Green and IBT boss Dan Tobin heated up. Tobin's

²³⁸ Hansen, "The Abern Clique," 24; Burnham to Cannon, 17 June 1936, Box 3, Folder 9/Reel 4, JPC Papers. Co-researchers in the Socialist Party entry, Jacob Zumoff and others at the Prometheus Research Library, have suggested that Cannon's move from New York to California may well have been part of an agreement struck between the Workers Party negotiators for entry (Cannon preeminent among them) and the New York hierarchy of the Socialist Party. Zumoff notes that around May 1936 Thomas wrote to Harry Laidler that discussions had taken place with Jack Altman about "the admission of Jim Cannon to the Party" and that, "The plan seemed to me reasonably good." (Norman Thomas memorandum to Harry Laidler, undated (1936), from Socialist Party of America Papers, Duke University, Reel 33, courtesy of Zumoff.) Unfortunately, nothing more is known about this plan, which may have been agreed to at the most general level with respect to the admission of the Workers Party leadership, such as Cannon and a number of others, or it could have related more particularly to Cannon, whom figures such as Altman might well have regarded as especially troubling. This plan could have simply designated that all Workers Party entryists join, not as members of a specific organization, but as individuals, which is what happened in the end. Or, in a more offensive vein, it could have stipulated that Cannon be required to leave New York. Since I have found no specific indication in any private correspondence between Cannon and his comrades in the Workers Party relating to this kind of condition, nor did Cannon or any of these entryists ever subsequently mention *any* Socialist Party stipulation that Cannon extricate himself from New York as part of the conditions of Workers Party entry (when the harsh requirements of entry in other areas were discussed and alluded to), I must conclude that Cannon's move to California was a private decision, as outlined in the interpretation above. Jacob Zumoff to Bryan Palmer, "Thoughts on SP Entry Draft," email communication, 4 May 2018. In "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 260–280, Shachtman discusses much relating to the entry, the onerous conditions imposed on the Workers Party, and Cannon's perspectives, but his comments on Cannon's relocation to California are brief. He says simply that, "Soon after we entered, Cannon moved to the West Coast to be active in the California organization" (267).

revocation of 574's charter, the creation of a rival "official" IBT Local 500, and the animosities this clash of teamster organizations in Minneapolis entailed had been smoldering since 1935. May 1936 unleashed a flurry of internecine union violence, which involved imported thugs from Chicago. Teamster leaders were blackjacked by such mobsters, and gunfire rang out in streets and alleyways. Cannon made his way to Minneapolis, determined to do what he could to help beat back the Tobin offensive. He spent five weeks sitting through the trying back-and-forth exchanges between Local 574's leadership and the IBT officialdom, an ordeal that necessitated building a working alliance with Teamsters Joint Council President, Patrick Corcoran, and consolidating further support across the spectrum of trade unions in the Twin Cities. Out of touch with Rose for three weeks, Cannon finally wrote to her that the Drivers' Union had been reinstated, Tobin conceding to return the organization's AFL-IBT charter and keep its staff intact. Writing to Arne Swabeck, Jim reported that, "Minneapolis was in good shape" and the "dangerous and risky move of reaffiliation has gone off to our advantage so far." Jim told Rose that the credit for successfully ending Local 574's exile, returning the "outlaw" union to the mainstream of the labor movement, belonged to "the local comrades" who did "the job themselves." But as Rose suggested in a letter to a comrade, Jim undoubtedly helped "greatly by making sure that no mistakes were made in the negotiations with Tobin." She was deeply troubled, however, by Jim's health and state of mind. He was "extremely low, and even talks of death. He seems to think he will need an operation. But we will see about that after he is examined here." The seemingly never-ending pressures and anxiety-inducing political crises of 1935–36 were obviously taking their toll on Cannon.²³⁹

With Rose working hard to establish a book store in Los Angeles – "directly opposite SP headquarters, and in the heart of the needle trades market" – Cannon took his leave of Minneapolis and journeyed to nearby Chicago. After five weeks away from New York, Cannon realized "how isolated the comrades in the field are and how necessary it is that information letters be sent ... regularly." He was meeting with Goldman, but was desperate to be apprised about the entry and international developments. "I am in the dark," complained Cannon, who

239 On the Minneapolis events see Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters*, 229–235; Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Power* (New York: Monad, 1973), esp. 123–132; George Dim Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1970, esp. 353–357; Walker, *American City*, 260–263. On relevant correspondence: Karsner [unsigned] to Jack Wasserman, 20 July 1936, Box 3, Folder 9/Reel 4, JPC Papers; Burnham to Cannon, 23 May 1936/24 May 1936; Cannon to Swabeck, 30 July 1936 [sleeve of correspondence, 1936–37].

was keen to get to California, where “The Party there is humming – all our way.” Roughly two weeks later, Cannon informed Swabeck that he arrived in Tujunga, California, an LA neighborhood in the foothills of the San Gabriel mountains, with \$9 in his pocket, only to find Rose flat broke. The couple’s meagre belongings, the most precious items being Jim’s books and correspondence, were being looked after by New York comrades, who had salvaged furniture from the couple’s abandoned Greenwich village apartment by putting the odd piece in storage and painting and varnishing a number of dilapidated items. Rose’s twenty-something daughter, Walta, was boarding with a couple, and Arne was promising to send money to Jim regularly. “Feeling pretty well,” Cannon was not quite the picture of a laid-back east coast vacationer, asking that “copies of all letters and documents from abroad” be forwarded to him, along with news of party developments. He was immediately “billed to give six Sunday night lectures for the SP branch,” and had enough of a sense of the local scene to intimate that, “The situation here in the SP & YPSL – from our point of view – is very good.” Fresh from talks with Goldman in Chicago, Cannon highlighted how well the *Appeal* was doing, and hoped that Swabeck was “pushing it in New York.” Indeed, as far as Cannon was concerned, the metropolitan center needed the infusion of perspectives from the provinces: “I see the SP much more clearly now than is possible from a New York view. The country is more radical and receptive to Revolutionary ideas than the leadership in New York.”²⁴⁰

In New York, Burnham and Swabeck (Shachtman was in Europe for a brief spell of working with the ICL and attending the Paris conference preparing the way for the founding of the Fourth International, returning to New York in August 1936) were holding down the entryist fort, although not without concerns. “I regret greatly that you are not here,” Burnham wrote to Cannon, and proceeded to outline how things seemed to be going off the rails in the east coast metropolitan center. “The comrades in New York ... do not seem to be doing any too well. They are not attending branch meetings, taking very little part in the party activities – especially in the campaign work, and pulling some bad boners.” Most reports addressing work in New York’s Socialist Party branches, regardless of factional origin, indicated a lack of engagement. Abern wrote to Chicago’s Norman Satir that the leading city was “the farthest behind both in activities and in the rate of political progress that is being made and pressed,” a sluggishness that he attributed to Cannon’s particular stress on cautiousness and going slow. Spector, induced to come to New York by Abern, was

240 Karsner [unsigned] to Jack Wasserman, 20 July 1936; [Hildegard Swabeck?] to Rose and Jim, 1 August 1936, Box 3, Folder 9/Reel 4, JPC Papers; Cannon to Swabeck, 30 July 1936; Cannon to Swabeck, 11 August 1936 [sleeve of correspondence, 1936–37].

a bit of a bright spot; he seemed to be on side with the entry, and was loosening his ties to Abern, who was descending further into cliquism. “[Spector] is much more lively and vivacious than for many months,” Burnham reported happily, adding that the two intellectuals were working well together, especially on various publications, such as the *Appeal*. That said, “no caucus exists in New York,” and Burnham wanted to map out a policy, suggesting the necessity of quickly building a left wing consisting of “ourselves, the left YPSLs, the left wingers in the provinces, and the Zam-Tyler (Max Delson-Becker-Trager) group in New York.” Burnham was enthusiastic about creating a bloc “between ourselves and the left centrists,” one that would be sealed in a “program of action” that included “a daily paper.”

Swabeck and Shachtman, too, seemed to want to “take the initiative and really lay down a line for a fairly broad caucus in which we can play a serious and positive role.” There was talk of establishing a “Militant” caucus publication, although, as usual, the plan was being floated with significant restraints placed on the Trotskyist entryists. Swabeck was not keen on “being tied up in a responsibility for [a] discussion organ” on a basis which would have seen editorial authority concentrated overwhelmingly with the “Militants,” who would control nine editorial positions to the former Workers Party’s meagre two, a scheme hatched by the former Lovestoneite, Herbert Zam. This, Swabeck thought, “would surely have carried potentialities of a sharp division between us and the left Militants instead of breaking down barriers.” All of this came to a head when the New York “Militants,” tiring of remnants of the Old Guard controlling the *Call*, announced their intention to form a caucus and to issue a “new left-wing organ.”

Burnham and Shachtman, the latter having returned to New York, dueled over how, and at what rate, to join in this Socialist Party caucus stampede, and minds apparently changed overnight. The fundamental point of agreement was that some kind of involvement in a Militant/Zam-led caucus was mandatory. Shachtman plumped to go all-in, and even proposed, in conversations with Trotsky, to enter not only the Socialist Party, but to do a formal double entry into the “Militants” as well. Maintaining that it was time to move quickly, necessitating “immediate reorganization of the caucus, including the 2 out of 9 leftwing organ, which was an integral part of the proposition,” Shachtman was apparently willing to sacrifice a great deal. An informal meeting even took place, in which Zam and Max Delson rammed their limiting demands down Trotskyist throats, stipulating that a caucus be formed of the New York left wing, with an 11-person Board of Directors, two of whom would be former Workers Party members. The first meeting of the new left wing current was to be attended by no more than a dozen WPers, so as, in Zam’s and Delson’s words, not “to

give the impression that it was a Trotskyite caucus," with others being allowed in, one by one, in future months. Burnham reported that he and Shachtman bartered to up the allowed number of first attendees to twenty, but Cannon must have thought this achievement rather small beer. This deluge of New York news descended on Cannon at the same time that he became aware that his co-fusionist, A.J. Muste, was leaving the Fourth International to rejoin the Church. "Just heard the news about AJ going back to Jesus," wrote one close friend to Jim, "Quite a shock."²⁴¹

Cannon's opposition to the proposed caucus was unambiguous, and his enthusiasm and assertiveness in striking out in an entirely different direction unmistakable. He would premise the practical work of entry on precisely the same grounds that Trotsky had spelled out to Spector in his February 1936 discussions of American developments that took place in Norway. "Our duty in the s.p.," Trotsky insisted, "will be not discussion with centrists, but mass work, teaching the youth to do it ... I cannot say that the independent participation cannot lead to the growth of the independent revolutionary party, but this Way (entry) is the shortest way. ... Rather short – because the Militants without the Old Guard and with their inconsistent leadership, between pressure from you on the one hand and Stalinists on the other, cannot last for long. Part (of their following) will go to you and part to the Stalinists. Of course, depending on the objective situation" ²⁴²

241 The above paragraphs draw on [Hildegard Swabeck?] to Cannon, 1 August 1936; Burnham to Cannon, 1 August 1936; Swabeck to Cannon, 7 August 1936; Burnham to Cannon, 7 August 1936; Swabeck to Cannon, 13 August 1936; Burnham to Cannon, 19 August 1936, Box 3, Folder 9/Reel 4, JPC Papers; and for Shachtman's suggestion of WP entry into the "Militants" see Max Shachtman, "Report on the International Conference for the Fourth International," 5 November 1936, 5, Box 36, Folder 9, GB Papers, where Shachtman clearly favors a "long perspective" on the SP entry and reported to Trotsky something that was untrue: "I informed him that the American comrades had decided not only to enter the SP but also the Militant group." For a more skeptical view of Spector's commitment to entryism and his limited influence while in New York in this period see Hansen, "The Abern Clique," 7. Indeed, private Abern clique correspondence would suggest that the mercurial Spector was less and less involved in revolutionary politics, missing meetings and largely being unaccounted for. By the end of the year Spector was asked formally about his whereabouts: "You have missed a number of meetings during the recent weeks: are you unable altogether to attend these meetings." He was also pressed to deliver a manuscript to Pioneer Publishers that was long overdue. On New York's entry and its difficulties, as well as concern with Spector, see Abern to Glotzer, 15 July 1936 and Abern to Satir, 13 August 1936, in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 2, File 3; [Swabeck?] to Spector, 23 December 1936, Folders WP: July 1936, August 1–14 1936 & 15–31 December 1936 PRL, Chrono Files, January – October 1936 & November – December 1936.

242 "Conversation Between S. and T. on American Question," February 1936, from Albert

The view from New York, Cannon stated aggressively, was entirely wrong. Too early in the entry process to be able to judge how to construct principled political alignments, Cannon resisted jumping on any bloc/caucus bandwagons. "We do not know enough about the party yet for this," Cannon cautioned, adding that, "My own trip across the country has given me a much clearer picture than I was able to get in N.Y," and this "first-hand experience has also prompted me to modify and even to change the opinions I held in N.Y." More time was needed for experimentation, but in Cannon's mind the "surest way for us to get derailed, is to shift the emphasis of our attention to negotiations and maneuvers with the 'Militant' leaders in New York, including the so-called lefts. All we want and all we need from these gentry is a touch-me-not relationship which avoids violent clashes and definite commitments." Instead, the patient work should concentrate on education in the branches, in the youth movement, in the provincial centers, and above all, the steady development of the *Appeal* as the authentic propaganda organ of the **real** left wing. This would nurture an understanding in the leftward-moving ranks of the Socialist Party that a different kind of revolutionary organization was needed, more disciplined and less loose than the ostensibly "mass" party of the socialists.²⁴³

Minneapolis, Chicago, and California were all progressing well on this kind of basis, and New York needed to learn some lessons from the provinces. Any serious bloc with Zam & Co. Cannon saw as a long way off, especially since the issue of the labor party was becoming a hot topic of discussion within the Socialist Party. "Like all products of the Lovestone school, Zam thinks that the most important part of military strategy is camouflage," explained Cannon, and thus he "thinks we should content ourselves with smuggling in a few of our ideas under cover of a general 'left wing' combination of which he and others would be the formal leaders. Hence his absurd proposal for the establishment of a 'left wing' paper in which we would have two representatives out of a total of nine!" Cannon urged dropping all such talk. "It is far more important to get ten new subscribers for the *Appeal* than to spend ten hours or ten days in sterile negotiations with the 'Militants.'" Quiet integration, and cautious regular, principled work in the branches and on the 1936 election campaign – this

Glotzer Papers, Box 10, File 4, in Folder WP: Feb 16–29, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936.

243 This approach had something in common with, but also diverged significantly from, Roger A. Carson, "Open Letter to Trotskyists Joining s.p.," *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (July 1936), 8–9. Carson welcomed the Trotskyists, and thought they could do excellent work, but wanted them to accept the looseness of the sp somewhat uncritically. Instead, see Glen Trimble, "Mass Party or Vanguard Party?" *Labor Action*, 23 January 1937; Lydia Biedell, "Discipline in a Working-Class Party," *Socialist Appeal*, 1 (March 1935), 14–17.

was Cannon's orientation: "avoiding collisions wherever possible, establishing the *Appeal* more firmly, and sinking deeper roots into the party ranks."

Cannon followed these general strictures with some specific guidelines for practical work, which included setting up a "Socialist Appeal Institute/Association" after the November election, to which SPers interested in discussion of party policy would be invited. Then, sufficient time having elapsed, the *Appeal* could be "published twice a month, without any preliminary announcement or ballyhoo." Most importantly, congruent with his now increasingly jaundiced views of New York's limitations, Cannon proposed decentralizing the leadership. "The further we get away from the center of conservatism and passivity represented by the 'Militant' leaders in New York, and the closer we come to the rank and file of the party and the Yipsels," Cannon wrote, "the warmer is the response to revolutionary ideas, and the more unobstructed out progress." In Minneapolis, Trotskyists now led an SP branch of 145 members, and the state convention saw a few "case-hardened Farmer-Laborites" bolt a party in which nearly all serious proletarian militants were gravitating toward Fourth Internationalists. The Stalinists, also, had largely been driven out. Prospects in Chicago were equally good, and Cannon proposed that he relocate there for an extended period to shore up the gains being registered. Arriving in California, moreover, Cannon found the entryists everywhere "the most active in the ranks and politically," both in the party and in the youth. "The fact that the Los Angeles branch arranges a series of lectures for me without any opposition from anyone, is an indication of the situation," Cannon wrote, pointing out that, "The party here has been revitalized by the entry of our comrades, has taken a leading part in the recent agricultural strike, and has established a splendid headquarters."

Could this have happened in New York, Cannon seemed to be asking? Not if Zam's and Delson's strictures were to be taken seriously. On bargaining with such Militants, Cannon's second short letter was devastatingly dismissive:

I am especially apprehensive about the attitude of comrades who are ready to accept any terms laid down by these shysters without even making counter-proposals. This, in my opinion, is out of date. When we were trying to get into the party and could accomplish it only by agreement with them, we had to make big concessions. Like all petty shopkeepers, they drove a very hard bargain with us because they had the advantage. That condition does not exist any longer in the party as a whole. Why do they want us in the militant caucus? Out of friendship, or perhaps political solidarity? Not in the least! In regard to us it appears to me that they have one emotion: fear, especially of the *Appeal*. And one aim: to muzzle us on the ground that we are all in one caucus.

As to the 2 to 9 or 2 to 11 representation, Cannon was scathing in his rejection of “any such suicidal agreement.” To Burnham he wrote forcefully:

Under no circumstances agree to any kind of joint editorship of a new paper which would be dominated by the militants and become a deadly rival of the *Appeal*. To all such proposals we should counter-pose the demand that a fight be made to convert the *Call* into a political organ, giving expression to different views. We must not concede that the ‘official’ paper is as a matter of course to be a reformist scrap book, while the left wing contents itself with blowing off steam in a monthly internal sheet. If Zam & Co. say they want a more radical paper, tell them to fight to change the character of the *Call* and we will support them. But as for a new internal paper for which we take responsibility and have no control – NOTHING DOING!

Cannon thus made it abundantly clear that he was opposed to the “drastic decision” made on “such short notice,” an “ill-advised procedure” that “sharply reverses a policy we [have] pursued up to now,” but he remained convinced that “such good results” as have been achieved by entry were just the beginning. Swabeck concurred, adding ironically, “Glotzer and Satir are in agreement with your view point. I hope that does not convince you that you are wrong.”

The newly-christened Californian’s disposition was thus sunny even as he rained on Shachtman’s New York parade, feeling that “a lucky star seems to guide our work in connection with our entry.” He imagined great possibilities ahead, and perhaps let his enthusiasm run away from him, suggesting the possibility of an actual “reconstitution of the [Socialist Party] on a revolutionary basis.” Even if this was not to happen, Cannon predicted that in keeping their wits about them and not leaping into unknown and troubled political waters, Trotskyists could not fail, and might well soon count their forces “in thousands where we used to number them in hundreds, and before that in tens.”²⁴⁴

244 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon to Comrades, 21 August 1936; Cannon to Comrade, 23 August 1936; Cannon to Burnham, [sleeve of correspondence, 1936–37]; Swabeck to Cannon, 31 August 1936, Box 3, Folder 9/Reel 4, JPC Papers; Myers, *Prophet’s Army*, 132; and, on the California agricultural strike, A Striker, “California Agricultural Strike,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (July 1936), 12. On the formation and consolidation of the Socialist Appeal Association see “Socialist Appeal Association,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (November 1936), 16; Swabeck to Selander, 14 December 1936, “General Organizational and Secretarial Correspondence, 1923–1956,” Boxes 15–16/Reels 20–21, JPC Papers. Abern concurred with much of the “formerly Cannonite” New York “Club” that establishing a caucus with the SP Militants was advisable, suggesting that Cannon would “change his mind without much trouble on

There was, of course, the perennial problem of money, American Trotskyism's cupboards being bare. The *Appeal*, even on a Spartan monthly basis, drained the coffers that sustained the plans Cannon was proposing, and he pushed New York to raise money for the Chicago Trotskyist paper. This may have fed into Cannon's desire to take up a post as the western states organizer of the Socialist Party, a job he was recommended for by Glen Trimble, an SP left-winger Cannon described as "the strongest SP figure in the west," a true militant drawn to "cooperative relations" with revolutionaries. In next to no time Trimble was integrated into the Trotskyist entryist circle, "included in all of [its] activities." With his Californian Sunday night lectures drawing crowds of 250 and growing, Cannon remained enthused, urging Burnham not to "hesitate about a shift in forces to the field." He suggested that Swabeck and Shachtman relocate to Chicago, and Satir might be well deployed in California, calling as well for all correspondents outside of New York to be "bombarded with letters ... urging them to be more active for the *Appeal*." Cannon was also clearly buoyed by the presence in California of former Musteites Ted Selander and Anthony Ramuglia, both of them, apparently, taking some time off to visit the west coast and putting their vacations to good organizational effect.²⁴⁵

The response from New York's "Club," the leading comrades of the former Workers Party, indicated that the center was tiring of what they clearly regarded as Cannon's pot-shots from the periphery.²⁴⁶ Swabeck dismissed Cannon's den-

this score, because this step, if it can be carried thru, is the most sensible and valuable one we could possibly take in respect to finally reaching the articulate militant elements in the S.P. and giving us the opportunity to meet the so-called Militant leaders face to face on issues, on which we have everything to gain and nothing to lose." Abern to Glotzer, 11 September 1936, in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 2, File 3, Folder WP: September 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936.

245 On the worsening finances of the former Workers Party group see Swabeck to Cannon, 13 August 1936; Swabeck to Cannon, 31 August 1936, Box 3, Folder 9/Reel 4, JPC Papers. Note also Cannon to Unnamed Comrade, [possibly Joseph Carter], 2 September 1936, Box 42, Folder 12, GB Papers. For an example of one of Cannon's speeches in this period see Cannon, Speech Notes, "Socialism & the Trade Union Question," Los Angeles, 20 September 1936, Box 29, Folder 1–7/Reel 35, JPC Papers. On the integration of Trimble and others in San Francisco see Harry Ring interview, 13 February 1974, 5.

246 In what follows I develop a detailed account of Cannon's California estrangement from the New York leadership of the Trotskyist entryists. This has rarely been addressed. For a cryptic allusion to the politics of this process of differentiation, stressing how Cannon "repeatedly upstaged the elected leadership of his group in New York, mailing out counter-proposals to the faction national committee" and functioning "like a dual Political Committee," see Leslie Evans, *Outsider's Reverie: A Memoir* (Los Angeles: Boryana Books, 2010), 233, quoted in Paul Le Blanc, *Left Americana: The Radical Heart of US Politics* (Chicago:

igration of the importance of New York, which remained, in the view of Shachtman, Burnham, and Spector the political center of the United States. Relocation of the "Club's" leading comrades to Chicago was ruled out of order, it being claimed, not without reason, that such a drastic move of key personnel would weaken dramatically the capacity of entryists to function on a national level. Cannon's request to take up the position of the Socialist Party's western state's organizer was also denied, with instructions that he return to New York "no later than the first of the year." Swabeck also chose to dress Cannon down for his rhetorical excesses – reference to "fancy politics with the 'Militant' leaders"; "the 'comedy' of 'negotiations' with Zam-Altman & Co."; "shadow-boxing"; "horse trading." Such "misplaced witticisms," Swabeck contended, were anything but the "sober political characterizations" demanded at the current conjuncture. As to the issue of the left wing caucus in New York, the "Club" fought back:

Progress in New York can be (and has been) made by direct work in the branches, by speaking at every opportunity, by writing for the [*American Socialist Monthly*], by distributing the *Appeal*, by personal contacts, etc. And to continue with progress means to avoid as yet any direct break with the 'Militant' leadership, which controls the New York organization. This, in turn, means that a necessary minimum of negotiations must continue: not as a waste of time and a comedy, but to avoid a premature crisis which would be in every respect disadvantageous to us. ... The party life is so stagnant, the attendance at branch meetings so poor, the immersion in petty details so considerable, the chances for political discussion and educational work so limited, that the formation of a membership caucus ... would be, though not essential, in all probability desirable.

Relations between Cannon and virtually the entire New York leadership, which managed to draw Chicago's Al Goldman into the gauntlet hectoring Cannon somewhat, had taken a decided turn for the worse.²⁴⁷

Haymarket, 2006), 212–213. I would not necessarily characterize what was going on in this way, as the discussion below suggests.

247 Burnham to Cannon, 2 September 1936; Goldman to Cannon, 4 September 1936; Swabeck to Cannon, ? September 1936; Goldman to Cannon, 16 September 1936; Abern to Cannon, 24 September 1936, Box 3, Folder 9/Reel 4, JPC Papers; Goldman to Cannon, 24 September 1936, Folder WP: September 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936. The *Socialist Appeal* was, at this time, a forum for debate over the Labor Party, with Burnham, for instance, investing his time in challenging Gus Tyler's call for the SP to build the Labor Party. See Gus Tyler, "For a Labor Party," *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (August 1936), 4–5; Burnham, "For a Revolutionary Socialist Party," *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (September 1936), 5–8.

Cannon bounced back. He fired off a 21 September 1936 letter chastising the center for its failure to provide him with basic information: "I received the formal notice about Traitor Muste – without comment or details – more than a week after I had heard the rumor indirectly, and up to the present moment I have heard nothing further, and nothing about the results of the two trips abroad except a couple of scanty paragraphs which left a dozen questions unanswered." Apprised by figures like Selander that the *Appeal* was hardly being promoted in Toledo, and judging that across the country little was being done to support financially Goldman's monthly, with too much instead invested in the charade of coalitions with New York's fake "Militants," Cannon unloaded:

Unfortunately, it appears to me that we are not yet oriented along the lines of concentration on the *Appeal* and still think in terms of effecting a miracle by means of cooperation with people who will soon enough reveal themselves as our most poisoned and conscious opponents. ... If the *Appeal* is paramount – and anyone who doesn't admit this now should be sent to an asylum – then it must have **first** call on our energies and resources. ... Well, I will keep on repeating myself on this question until some of you comrades in New York will begin to realize that I am in earnest: One letter to the comrades in the country urging them to do something to circulate and support the *Appeal* outweighs a dozen parleys with Altman, Zam & Co.

Cannon was now living in "mounting apprehension" that entry was "becoming entangled" in a morass of considerations, not only secondary, but deeply compromising. "It would be folly for us to agree to anything that does not carry real, that is organizational, guarantees of our independence of action in political matters and our freedom to develop the *Appeal*."²⁴⁸

Reliving his soap box agitator days in the Industrial Workers of the World, drawing such funds as he could from his speechifying at Sunday night forums, Cannon balked at the bureaucratized sensibilities and political maneuvering among Socialist Party "Militant" big-wigs that seemed to define political life for his New York comrades. To Swaback, his oldest comrade, Cannon pleaded for documents, news, and reports, even dues stamps that he had paid in full, the lack of which might cause him to be "dropped from the membership rolls." For Cannon, these organizational details were not mere formalities and mundane

248 Cannon to Swaback, 21 September 1936 [sleeve of correspondence, 1936–37].

office work, but the groundwork of entryism's possible success, which required, as well, an approach that accented building the work of the Socialist Party in ways that would highlight the revolutionary politics that lay behind entry. It was to Arne Swabeck, as a fellow Wobbly, that Cannon pitched his plea for a new course in the entryist project:

It is a fatal mistake to think that our job now is to play fancy politics with the 'Militant' leaders. No, every comrade should have a definite sector of the rank and file to work on. It makes me sick to hear about the New York comrades pining for 'the active political life to which they are supposed to be accustomed.' The 'active political life' for all of us now is in some branch carrying on the elementary work of education, organization and recruitment of new forces into the party. ... We should emulate the old I.W.W. system of a squad of 'foot loose rebels', ready to go anywhere, who could be thrown into the spots where they are most needed at the moment.

Cannon had seen enough of the Socialist Party to know that it could not be remade into a revolutionary organization through "maneuvers at the top." He saw only a moribund shell, a structure that had to "rebuilt from the bottom." Galvanized by young comrades like Charles Curtiss, Ramuglia, and Selander, Cannon won them over to his views, but Swabeck would be a harder nut to crack. Yet Cannon depended on him for sustenance – "don't forget that I am depending on you to help me pay the debts which have accumulated here" – complaining that, "The Los Angeles local is getting rich on the profits of my lectures, but the comrades have not thought it best to change the original decision to give me ten dollars a lecture. You can see where that leaves me." Two-and-a-half weeks later Cannon's tone in writing to Swabeck shifted, angry that his old collaborator seemed lackadaisical: "What in hell happened to the money you were going to send me. ... And when in THE HELL are we going to get a report of the trip of our world traveler? [Shachtman] ... I WANT NEWS! Please let me know what is going on – or, is that a secret?"²⁴⁹

Cannon soon toned down his belligerence but upped the level of his agitational enthusiasm. During a mid-September 1936 trip to San Francisco Cannon was featured in Socialist Party-sponsored public forums. He also met with three leaders of the west coast seamen, establishing important connections to the

249 Cannon to Swabeck, 3 September 1936; Cannon to Swabeck, 21 September 1936, [sleeve of correspondence, 1936–37]. Bert [Burke] Cochran in Ohio was also on board with Cannon's orientation, Cochran to Swabeck, 8 October 1936, Box 3, Folder 9/Reel 4, JPC Papers.

Sailors Union of the Pacific [SUP] and the umbrella-group of unions, the Maritime Federation of the Pacific, headed by Harry Lundeberg. This deepening intervention in the politics and struggles of workers on the west coast, to be explored in detail in the next chapter, was facilitated by a fortunate, if rather freewheeling, occurrence, in which a Trotskyist, Barney Mayes [Mass/Moss] secured a sinecure as editor of the Maritime Federation's newspaper, the *Voice of the Federation*. Described as a "fluke" by one Trotskyist seafaring militant, Mayes had apparently made a connection to Lundeberg through a clerical helper working at the SUP offices named Norma Perry. A disgruntled former Communist Party militant, Perry realized that a war was imminent between Lundeberg and the Communist Party, whose strength on the west coast lay in the International Longshoremen led by Harry Bridges. She cautioned Lundeberg to be wary of the Communist Party. When a Trotskyist working on an academic thesis came to the SUP offices seeking information Perry, well aware that no love was lost between Stalinists and Trotskyists, reasoned that Lundeberg might benefit from a tactical alliance with people cognizant of the weak links in the class armor of the official representatives of the Comintern. She had the visiting scholar put her in touch with Mayes, whom she then introduced to Lundeberg. In short order, Mayes was sitting in the editor's chair of the *Voice of the Federation*.²⁵⁰

Mayes was aligned with Martin Abern, and there was something cliquish about the way in which the young Trotskyist academic put him in touch with Norma Perry. Cannon, who knew Mayes for years from the early days of the Communist League of America, considered the Abernist's freelancing and dispensing with the direction of the Workers Party entryist club as to what he should do upon being offered the editorial control of the *Voice of the Federation*, suspect. But he was not about to bypass the obvious advantages Mayes' new position conferred on the Trotskyists. Nor was he entirely unhappy when, given his judgement of Mayes' abilities as an editor, he learned of another clique move on Abern's part. The New York "Club" member had, entirely on his own initiative, dispatched another figure from his inner circle of confidantes, Joe Hansen of Utah, to California. A skilled writer and editor, Hansen was soon doing Mayes' job, but with more efficiency and aplomb than the original Lundeberg appointee could muster. Cannon thought all of this "a flagrant example of how a complete clique operates, through the Party but behind the

250 Stephen Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea: A History of the Sailor's Union of the Pacific, 1885–1985* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1986), 120.

back of the Party.” That said, he proceeded to conduct his work in California as though these clique actions had not happened. He knew well that both Mayes and Hansen were being fed “insider information” from Abern, but he never betrayed any hint of his understanding of what was going on and why it was wrong. Cannon’s California entryist work was conducted so as to “assimilate as many members of the Socialist Party as possible,” and to educate those affiliated with his own Trotskyist politics in the best way to function as a revolutionary in the labor movement. Although it raised the hackles of Abern, who never tired of chastising Cannon to younger comrades such as Hansen, Cannon thus largely dispensed with factional meetings during his California sojourn, and decided not to have “regular caucus meetings of the Trotskyists.” Cognizant of the need to include all SP left-wingers in the activities of the Trotskyists, Cannon later remembered that, “first thing you know we apparently had a majority of the San Francisco branch, so what the hell do you need a fraction or caucus when everything was going alright?”

This and other features of Cannon’s leadership on the west coast soon convinced Mayes that Cannon was “the only real Bolshevik in the American movement and its real leader and real expounder of Trotsky’s views, [and that] Abern was an incorrigible intriguer.” Hansen took some time to jettison the suspicions of Cannon instilled in him by Abern, but he was nonetheless eventually able to see that the Cannon he worked with in California “had neither horns nor hoofs nor forked tail.” The Kansas revolutionary was “a person who lived on the same poverty-stricken scale as the rest of us, a leader who took part in branch activity.” Slowly, Hansen came to understand that the “clique descriptions [of Cannon] were disappointingly not quite accurate.” Despite being bombarded with private, clandestine letters from Abern, in which confidential communications from members of the Political Committee were forwarded and tales of Cannon’s differences with the supposedly united New York center were retailed to a novice comrade, Hansen came to appreciate “Cannon’s complete silence.” “I expected Cannon to appeal to the membership,” Hansen later wrote, but he did not, providing a “strong lesson in the Bolshevik method of deciding issues and appealing to the membership only on principled grounds.” With neither Spector nor Abern willing to come to California and work in the mass struggles of the working class and promote entryism at one of its most successful junctures, Hansen ultimately became a convinced Cannonist, firm in his judgement that the revolutionary movement gained immeasurably in having Cannon on the west coast. For his part, Cannon simply let Hansen come to his own conclusions, promoting him in the movement because of his abilities. “I just gave him a chance,” Cannon later told Harry Ring, “I didn’t try to factionalize him at all. He found his own way.” Meanwhile, Cannon functioned somewhat on his

own, watched, as Hansen recalled, “at all times by the clique the same as a flock of chickens watch a fox outside the pen.”²⁵¹

16 Entryist Estrangement

Cannon's sense of isolation in California was real enough. Goldman wrote to him in mid-October 1936, noting that as he traveled from Chicago to New York, with lecture stopovers in Detroit, Toledo, and Cleveland, he was frequently asked, “What became of Jim Cannon?” Comrades “all know what became of Muste but they don't know what happened to Cannon.” To put Jim back on the political map, Goldman insisted he write the lead article on the Russian Revolution for the November issue of the *Appeal*, a task Cannon had to decline, Shachtman standing in for him. By this point, things were moving quickly. Cannon was deeply involved in discussions with Trimble about the creation of a weekly organ of “revolutionary socialism” that might further the cause of militant west coast seamen. Lundeberg and the SUP had just embarked on a waterfront strike waged not only against the bosses but in defiance of a “Roosevelt-CP-reactionary bloc, which has been maneuvering one of the most cynical betrayals in the history of the American labor movement.” Bridges, as head of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Association [ILWA], was reported in the mainstream newspapers to have “attempted to head off the strike to avoid embarrassment for Roosevelt. Everybody expected

²⁵¹ The above paragraphs draw on Hansen, “The Abern Clique,” esp. 14, 15, 17, 19, 22–24; Harry Ring interview, 13 February 1974, esp. 2–7. Hansen would stay in the Trotskyist movement, Mayes leave it. Hansen eventually severed relations with his former Abernite comrade. For more on Mayes see Frank Lovell in Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 129–130. Shachtman later recalled that California was one of many places where the Trotskyist entryists worked diligently to build the Socialist Party, noting that Cannon's leadership resulted in the state's Socialist Party “very soon [being] under our leadership.” “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 273–274. Placing the accent on the successes Cannon achieved on the west coast, it is nevertheless important to recognize that there was always a strong opposition to Trotskyism evident in California during the brief entry, with Thomas loyalists like Lillian Symes and her husband Travers Clement banging loudly the anti-Trotskyist drum. In part, this was no doubt a consequence of, in Ross's words, Cannon coming “close to taking over the state party.” See Ross, *The Socialist Party of America*, 379–380; Hansen, “The Abern Clique,” 19; Clement to State Executive Committee, Socialist Party of California, 13 February 1937; Clement to Cannon, 15 February 1937 [misdated 1936], Folder WP: 9–28 February 1937, PRL, Chrono File, January–October 1937, the latter denouncing “your wholly spurious and unprincipled ‘left wing,’” and accusing Cannon of Stalinism. Also Glen Trimble to Tyler and Trager, 17 May 1937, “General Organizational and Secretarial Correspondence, 1923–1956,” Boxes 15–16/Reels 20–21, JPC Papers.

he would succeed, but he was outgeneraled by Lundeberg and his sailors." Cannon thought "big dangers are ahead," with a new chapter in the labor movement and the left being written in California, and he needed the support of Trotskyists across the country. But he wondered if his leadership comrades in New York would get on board: "PLEASE COMMUNICATE WITH ME AT ONCE ... DO NOT DELAY," were his official parting words. In a private note to Swabeck, Cannon scrawled a threatening demand: "I want a prompt reply to the request herein for the addresses of our comrades **or no further communications of any kind between us.**" In another letter to leading comrades, including Swabeck, Cannon's impatience and irritation was impossible to miss. "Now, if you see things differently I hope you will not settle the question in your usual high and mighty manner with a summary decision. This question is important enough to **discuss** from all angles and, in case of difference, to consult the opinions of a few other leading comrades for a change. ... Please appoint someone to send **information letters** to interested comrades who live west of Yonkers!!" Communications to Cannon from comrades and close friends outside of the upper echelons of the entryist "Club" must only have reinforced doubts, with the signs of discontent difficult to misinterpret. John G. Wright [Joseph Vanzler/Usick] wrote to Jim of his "disgust" that "our printshop has been **liquidated**," noting that the New York leadership "feel relieved of a 'white elephant.'" Wright referred to this leading contingent of comrades as "the tops."²⁵²

As much as the New York leadership paid some lip service to Cannon's pressing pleas for support and urgent enthusiasms around the potential of mass work on the waterfront and elsewhere in California, it was apparent that with his absence the core contingent of the Trotskyist entryists was unable to align in agreement on much. The leading center of entrism began to crumble in terms of a coherent perspective; Cannon's return to New York was mandatory if the "Club's" orientation was to solidify according to Vincent Ray Dunne, one of the few comrades in touch with Cannon close enough to him personally to inquire about the health problems of Jim and Rose. "In connection with the work in California, the state paper, the work in the Seamen's Union, there is a serious question in my mind, in view of the conditions in Chicago and probably in New

²⁵² [Cochran?] to Cannon, 1 October 1936; Goldman to Cannon, 13 October 1936; Cannon to Comrades, 20 October 1936; Goldman to Cannon, 26 October 1936, Box 3, Folder 9/Reel 4, JPC Papers; Max Shachtman, "Nineteen Years of the Russian Revolution," *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (November 1936), 3–5; John G. Wright to Cannon, 4 November 1936; Cannon to Swabeck, "Draft Circular Letter," 6 November 1936, Box 4, Folder 1, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Cannon to Comrades [Swabeck], 13 October 1936, [sleeve of correspondence, 1936–37]; Cannon to Comrades, 4 October 1936; Abern to Glotzer, 21 October 1936, in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 2, File 3, Folder WP: October 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936.

York as to whether you should remain there now to take active charge of this work," wrote Dunne. "It seems to me that recent developments demand your presence in the east."²⁵³

Cannon thought not, pressing for a new newspaper, *Labor Action*, based in San Francisco, to be created as a "national left wing organ," even though the west coast was a far from ideal location for such a weekly. Still, Cannon claimed it could be established with local resources within the month. Supported from New York, such a paper would complement the *Socialist Appeal*, which could service Chicago and the east coast, its issuance as a theoretical monthly stabilized. Cannon was undoubtedly overly zealous, concluding, "The maritime militants need us and will facilitate our entry into the situation. That cannot be very effective, however, without a paper. I don't want to promise too much, but I do think there is the making of another and bigger Minneapolis in the possibilities opening up before us." Swabeck cabled Cannon bluntly in early October 1936, throwing a splash of cold water on Cannon's red-hot enthusiasm. Welcoming the establishment of *Labor Action*, Swabeck wired Cannon that California initiatives were not about to displace already existing projects and their national orientation. "APPROVE PAPER AND YOUR CONNECTION WITH IT STOP DISAGREE ENTIRELY YOUR ORIENTATION STOP APPEAL FIRST WITH FIRST CLAIMS AND MAJOR POSITION IN PERSPECTIVE STOP CANNOT BE REPLACED BY REGIONAL AGITATIONAL VENTURE STOP WILL GUARANTEE CALIFORNIA PAPER SUPPORT IN DISTRIBUTION AND EDITORIAL MATTER BUT DIRECT FINANCIAL SUBSIDY CONTINGENT UPON PRIOR CLAIMS."²⁵⁴

There was an echo of this in Goldman's correspondence with Cannon as well, taking as it did the form of downplaying somewhat Cannon's accent on the importance of *Labor Action*, the first number of which appeared 28 November 1936. The Chicago attorney tended to view the new paper a little skeptically, perhaps because launching it was something of a challenge to the hegemony of Goldman's *Appeal*. Acknowledging that getting a weekly out in California would be a tremendous accomplishment, Goldman nonetheless wrote to Can-

253 Dunne to Cannon, 14 October 1936; Glotzer and Gould to Swabeck, 7 October 1936, in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 4, File 13, Folder WP: October 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936. A dissenting voice on the importance of developments in New York, obviously written to buttress Cannon's position, was Bert Cochran to Swabeck, 8 October 1936, File WP: October 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936: "concentrate upon building the circulation of the 'Appeal'; build up the Appeal Association, our leading comrades to make tours, etc. and we do **not** set up rigid structures in the form of 'centers', 'blocs' etc. – so far as possible."

254 Cannon to Comrades, 4 October 1936; Swabeck to Cannon, Western Union, 7 October 1936, Folder WP: October 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936.

non that he had his doubts about such a venture. "The comrades in New York were not any too optimistic. ... After all, even if the venture in California is successful the *Appeal* is ours completely and we have to establish it on a basis where it can do the most effective work. That means a semi-monthly. I agree that we should push the western paper but whatever funds we have should go to make the *Appeal* a semi-monthly and a better paper." Goldman initially balked at what he considered Cannon's and Trimble's insistence that the *Appeal* remain a monthly and focus its attention on theoretical matters. With time and the appearance of a number of issues of *Labor Action*, the Chicago-based socialist attorney agreed that the *Appeal* could well concentrate on "training the advanced workers."²⁵⁵

Outside of those in Chicago and Minneapolis who were closest to Cannon, in New York the core of the "Club" was now divided on what some were calling "Cannon's California perspective." This approach, Burnham suggested, was to rely "virtually exclusively on 'the provinces', counting on them to drag New York after them by some sort of political osmosis." Shachtman, now clearly separated from Cannon not only by geography but by a growing political distancing, took an opposite stand. Designated a "New York perspective," in which strategy was dictated by what could be done in the metropolitan center, which inevitably would and should determine all questions, this pushed Shachtman at times into a bloc with Abern, Spector, and Joseph Carter. Especially contentious were discussions around the left-wing Socialist Party press, where there was talk of bringing on to the *Appeal* some "native" New York "Militants," possibly Zam and Altman, or collaborating in another publication. Burnham likened his own approach to a "national perspective," with consideration given to both poles of strategic attraction, but which had the added benefit of straddling divides. This fence-sitting manifested itself in other ways, with Burnham noting that decisions arrived at in one leadership meeting could be reconsidered the next day, "because someone or other changed his mind (an occurrence which seems rather frequent lately)." All of this fit easily with Abern's insistence, posed repeatedly in his gossipy factional correspondence, that the New York center was united, with "Abern, Shachtman, Burnham, Carter, Spector, etc., seeing eye to eye," and only Cannon, given to "ultimatums and his non-cooperative tone," posing problems.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵ Goldman to Cannon, 24 September 1936; Goldman to Swabeck, 27 November 1936; Goldman to Cannon, 18 December 1936, Folders WP: September 1936, 15–30 November 1936, & 15–31 December 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936.

²⁵⁶ Burnham to Cannon, 3 November 1936; Burnham to Cannon, 4 November 1936, Box 4, Folder 1/Reel 4, JPC Papers. Burnham's suggestion of differentiation within the New York

Cannon, tiring of this, let fire on Swabeck. Fed up with routine organizational inefficiency – such as his Socialist Party card with dues stamps being looked after and sent to him – and apoplectic that the New York “Center” continued to see the Socialist Party entry as nothing more than integrating into the centrist caucus of New York “Militants” led by Altman and Zam, Cannon chastised his old friend. Swabeck was upbraided for “administrative incompetence, sluggishness and indifference.” Cannon railed against Swabeck’s “lack of comprehension, to say nothing of ardent revolutionary sympathy in regard to the difficulties, problems and basic importance of field work.” Particularly irksome was Swabeck’s supposedly smug New York-centric assumption “that geographical accidents of residence automatically determine your position as the political center of the movement and free you from the necessity of consulting non-resident members before actions are taken or even of informing them afterward until they have heard all about it – usually in distorted forms – from common rumor and gossip.” Cannon was irate that New York was dragging its feet on promises to support what was happening on the Pacific coast:

If the promise is fulfilled and not promptly forgotten as has been the case with other promises ... [it will be] possible to assume that at least the **formal** relations of collaboration between me and what you call the “center,” which are hanging by one hair, can be maintained at least for the present. My experience during the past few months since leaving New York has been a bitter lesson to me. ... my work in the field has shown me what the SP really is – something you people do not know and can not learn from negotiations with Altman, Zam & Co. For another thing, I have learned in life the truly abominable role the New York “Center” plays in disorganizing and discouraging the work of our comrades in “the

center contrasts with the Abern’s repeated claims that “there are amongst the Club members in NY hardly any differences of opinion and this includes Martin Abern.” Glotzer was more prone to see differentiations, pressing the point of Cannon’s dangerous policies. See Hansen, “The Abern Clique,” esp. 20–21; Abern to Glotzer, 11 September 1936, in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 2, File 3; Abern to Glotzer, 13 November, 1936, in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 2, File 3; Glotzer to Swabeck, 15 November 1936, in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 4, File 13; Burnham to Cannon, 15 November 1936; Abern to Glotzer, 18 November 1936, in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 2, File 3; Glotzer to Abern, 30 November 1936; Glotzer to Swabeck, 30 November 1936, Folders WP: September 1936, 10–14 November 1936 & 15–30 November 1936, PRL, Chromo Files, January – October 1936 & November – December 1936.

provinces." ... I consider the building of real influence in the branches, locals, and state organizations the most important element of a revolutionary counter offensive at the moment. As to the course you have adopted in regard to Altman's caucus in spite of all warnings against it – which on the whole can only produce demoralization – I will say only one thing here: The proposed paper of Zam & Company is the touchstone. If you make any kind of agreement to support such a paper or to take editorial responsibility for it without formal sanction of a wide referendum, you and I will part company.

Cannon closed bluntly: "I propose to organize the left wing **against** the centrist bureaucrats and 'office politicians', not to join a movement and a paper under their hegemony."²⁵⁷

Cannon's disaffection from the New York leadership did not extend to him withdrawing in pique from all connection; he attempted to entice comrades in the east to write for *Labor Action*. This generated positive responses from

257 Cannon to Swabeck, 13 October 1936; Cannon to Swabeck, 6 November 1936; Cannon and Trimble to Comrades, 13 November 1936 [sleeve of correspondence, 1936–37]. In this latter communication Cannon and Trimble put forward a proposal linking the *Socialist Appeal* and *Labor Action* in a Socialist Appeal Association. Swabeck offered Cannon an olive branch, detailing developments in New York, assuring his old comrade that he would attend to matters pressures on his time had not permitted him to deal with and that "you can count upon my collaboration." The "sharpness" of Cannon's letter he would "leave aside for the time being." Swabeck to Cannon, 31 October 1936, Folder WP: October 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936. Swabeck would later take pains to answer Cannon in a comradely fashion in communications outlining differences between Cannon and the New York center sent to figures like Dunne and Glotzer. See Swabeck to Dunne, 10 November 1936; Swabeck to Glotzer, 13 November 1936, Folder WP: 10–15 November 1936, PRL, Chrono File, November – December 1936, in which he stressed that when Cannon presented his propositions relating to launching of *Labor Action* he did so with too little explanation, adding somewhat sarcastically, "But he did state in a somewhat generous fashion, that this paper could serve as **our national political weekly and the Appeal could then remain a monthly as it is now.**" Swabeck persisted in attempting to persuade Cannon that there was political capital to be gained in maneuvering among the splitting ranks of the Militant centrists. Cannon was in no mood to be convinced, having written to Morrow: "Even from the point of view of influencing some of the so-called lefts of the so-called militant leadership, the only thing that counts is a show of strength. The very suggestion that we should fall along behind those ... makes me so god damn mad that I can't speak coherently for hours This is bad for my domestic relationships as well as for my ulcers." See Cannon to Morrow, 12 November 1936; Swabeck to Cannon, 3 December 1936, Folders WP: 10–14 November 1936 & 1–14 December 1936, PRL, Chrono File, November – December 1936.

the likes of James Burnham and Felix Morrow, and subscription lists and the funds generated were sent his way by Swabeck and Dunne. But some comrades, even as they placated Cannon with agreement that much was wrong in New York, pleaded for less vitriol. Morrow, who had read all of Cannon's correspondence with Swabeck, responded that he "simply didn't understand the amount of heat generated." Claiming that, "Nobody in his right mind here doubts the great significance of your coast paper," Morrow insisted as well that few, if any, "understand your proposal for keeping the *Appeal* a monthly, shipping most of the center out of New York, and not participating in the caucus with the militants here." He counseled: "Maybe a little less heat and more light from you would be helpful." Joe Carter tried to impress upon Cannon that Gus Tyler, one of the New York "Militants" recently elected editor of the *Call*, was warming to the Trotskyists and wanted Cannon, Morrow, and Burnham to write for the mainstream Socialist paper. Goldman thought Cannon too harsh with respect to the Chicago leadership, supported Glotzer and Gould against a Trotskyist protégé in the Yipsels, Melos Most, and wondered aloud if the California State Executive of the SP might double-cross the *Labor Action* initiative.

Shoring Cannon up were the ever-resolute Vincent Ray Dunne, and "provincial" organizers such as Ohio's Bert Cochran and Ted Selander. The latter complained at one point that comrades in Toledo "received absolutely nothing from NYC (I mean the center)," relating to the disputes, while the former, gaining access to at least some of the correspondence, flipped the New York Center a rather condescending missive endorsing decentralization. "Undoubtedly, New York is the political center of the country and also of the Stalinists. What relation has that got towards our immediate work in the Socialist Party. I do not see what the function of a center would be at this time." Advocating sending Cannon and Shachtman to speak in Chicago, Philadelphia, and other receptive cities, Cochran stressed that leading comrades should be building a broad Appeal Association. "Of what advantage will it be to bunch all our comrades in New York?" asked the industrial organizer. As for "negotiations with Zam-Tyler? These are of third rate importance and **any one** of our leading comrades can handle them." Cannon grouched to Dunne that the "criminal conduct" of leading cadre in Chicago and New York was emboldening "the centrist bureaucracy ... [in] a conspiracy against us." Attempting to reconcile what was erupting into a cross-country war, Dunne wrote from Minneapolis urging Jim not to allow his "impatience with the comrades to obscure the understanding of the value that your views have with them. I believe that you should write a personal letter to James Burnham, and also a personal letter to Max Shachtman." Even Cannon's close friend, Usick (Joseph G. Wright), tried to temper Jim's resentments and hostilities, expressing concern at his "intransigence," praising the program of

caucus involvement with the “Militants” drafted by Burnham, and hinting at the growing separation of Cannon and Shachtman by noting that “the failure of S. to report in full his journey must hamper you considerably.”²⁵⁸

Cannon’s complaint that he was receiving “no concrete information of any kind from New York,” only stiffened his resolve to oppose all pandering to the “Militants,” Gus Tyler, and the revamped *Call*. “I have not become a hill-billy radical as you all seem to assume in New York,” Cannon fumed from what was now his home base of San Francisco. If he was not immune to pushing through every “crack in the rotten bureaucratic apparatus of the anti-revolutionary clique” at the helm of the New York Socialist Party, Cannon was nonetheless insistent that this must not be the sum total of the Trotskyist entryist project. Strategically, the only way forward against these “Militants,” according to Cannon, was “a battering ram,” and he clearly regarded *Labor Action* as just such a weapon. This perception was reinforced in mid-November 1936. Colorado Socialist Party left-wingers adopted a unanimous resolution criticizing concessions made to the Right-wing at a recent Party Convention, demanding a redrafting of the SP’s Declaration of Principles on a revolutionary basis. They declared themselves in favor of withdrawing from the Second International in order to build a Fourth International, and wrote to Glen Trimble that they were “glad that Jim Cannon is to [be the] editor of the new paper.” Buoyed by successes in the maritime sector and the imminent appearance of *Labor Action*, Cannon was able to express something positive to Vincent Ray Dunne in mid-November 1936. “I have been pretty badly burnt up by the sluggishness and short-sightedness the comrades in New York manifested and their tendency to get lost in the labyrinth of internal politics which leads exactly nowhere,” Cannon complained. “I feel better now since I got some of this out of my system and there are now signs of the new paper and mobilizing to support it.”²⁵⁹

258 The above paragraphs draw on Swabeck to Cannon, 6 November 1936; Cannon to Dunne, 6 November 1936; Morrow to Cannon, 8 November 1936; Goldman to Cannon, 8 November 1936; Carter to Cannon, 9 November 1936; Selander to Cannon, 10 November 1936; Dunne to Cannon, 10 November 1936; Cannon to Morrow, 12 November 1936; Swabeck to Cannon, 12 November 1936; Usick to Jim, 12 November 1936, Box 4/ Folder 1, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Cochran to Swabeck, 8 October 1936; Dunne to Swabeck, 10 November 1936, Folders WP: October 1936 & 10–14 November 1936, PRL, Chrono Files, January – October 1936 & November – December 1936.

259 Cannon to Joe Carter, 12 November 1936; Cannon to Comrades, 13 November 1936; Cannon to Dunne, 13 November 1936; Cannon to Goldman, 13 November 1936, Box 4/ Folder 1, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Cannon and Trimble to the Editorial Board of the Socialist Appeal, 13 November 1936; Cannon to Comrades, 13 November 1936 [sleeve of correspondence, 1936–37].

In Ohio, Selander, Preis, and Pollack remained pillars of Cannon support, describing “reports of your work in California” as reading “like a novel,” suggesting that the “slipping into the doldrums” was now over and the work of the Trotskyists revitalized. From Los Angeles, Charles Curtiss reported to Swabeck that, “The national implications of the California situation is immense. In the councils of the Socialist Party, comrade Cannon now speaks not as an ex-leader of the Workers Party, but as the leader today, of the California section of the Socialist Party, and an editor of one of its two weekly organs nationally.” Curtiss parlayed the west coast successes of entry into a suggestion that there be a rethinking of orienting to “the Militant group,” noting that with the strengthening of their position in California Workers Party entryists were “no longer second class citizens,” but “people with a substantial movement behind us,” capable of rallying rank-and-file left wingers in the SP. There was thus no need to “tend to the caprices of the New York Militants.” But in New York, there were always snags. Joe Carter confided to Cannon that Shachtman was following a treacherous course in conceding too much editorial authority to non-Trotskyist elements in the reconstitution of the *Socialist Appeal* editorial board, apparently agreeing to suppress the inclusion of “our comrades,” turning the reigns over to Left-wingers as a concession to Right-wing centrists who “fear the paper” and its influence.²⁶⁰

Burnham, cooling toward Cannon, now discerned four distinct positions jockeying for dominance within the Socialist Party Trotskyist “Club” that was “no longer operating as a single group.” Especially concerning was Cannon’s apparently wrong view that the *Socialist Appeal* “should be pushed in the background, and completely subordinated to *Labor Action*,” a false position that found echoes in other critical communications. Burnham, knowing well which buttons to push, likened Jim’s positions to that of Molinier in France, suggesting that the American movement was now embroiled in a process of “Frenchification.” In a long lecturing letter, Burnham accused Cannon of lapsing into “a grossly pragmatic and opportunist position.” In what must have been a particularly galling comparison, Burnham indicated that among the four positions evident in “the Club,” those of Abern, Cannon, Burnham, and Shachtman, Cannon’s view actually coalesced with that of Abern. The New York office func-

260 Carter to Cannon, 15 November 1936; Seleader, Preis, and Pollack to Cannon, 16 November 1936; Selander, Preis, and Pollack to Swabeck, 16 November 1936; Selander to Cannon, no date [16–17 November 1936?]; Dunne to Cannon, 16 November 1936 Box 4/Folder 1/Reel 4, JPC Papers; Curtiss to Swabeck, 7 December 1936, Folder WP: 1–14 December 1936, PRL, Chrono File, November – December 1936.

tionary had opposed entry, wanted “to get the whole thing over as quickly as possible,” and was maneuvering, “fishing in the stirred up waters ... with his usual clique methods.” This seeming critique of Abernite cliquism ignored the extent to which, on most of the contentious tactical issues Cannon raised, such as the significance of *Labor Action*, Abern aligned, not with Cannon, but with Burnham and others. Cannon, Burnham recognized, was no cliquist, but the patrician intellectual insisted that, “your rough Irish fashion” favored “the Bolshevik fist. And now you are smashing down the fist – not only where it is the best weapon, but where it can do nothing better than smash the china.” This kind of elitist scolding of the plebeian founder of American Trotskyism had to rankle.

Diplomacy and principled negotiations with the centrists was favored by Burnham. He cautioned against avoiding them and besieging them with revolutionary alternatives. Claiming to represent a national perspective, Burnham endorsed *Labor Action*, but subordinated it to the *Socialist Appeal* and wanted to hold it in abeyance as a kind of oppositional revolutionary challenge to the *Call*. This strategy, Burnham claimed, integrated Cannon’s orientation but bested it by being truly national in scope:

What I propose **includes** your policy, but gathers it into a full national policy. It may be outlined as follows: 1) The political spearhead of the national perspective to center around the immediate development of the national revolutionary left wing under our hegemony. Which means practically: Full speed ahead with the *Appeal*; semi-monthly publication immediately; formation of the Appeal Association; plans for an Appeal conference; enlargement of the editorial board, including our names; publication of the Platform; further development of the Platform in special articles, applications to local conditions, criticisms, etc. 2) Head-on advance of *Labor Action*, understood as politically subordinated to the *Appeal*, for the present confined in full expression to West and Mid-West. Filtering into East – no mass distribution here – until completion of Eastern experiment. 3) Completion of ‘Eastern experiment’ for East, with preparation for sharp turn the minute experiment is exhausted – which may be no more than a few days, may be several months. In this way we have all the advantage of bold attack, supplemented by a) protection of our flanks; b) chance to demoralize and confuse the enemy; c) chance to delay and undermine them before they take their positions.

Burnham was actually convinced that the Trotskyists, following such a course, could “take over the SP. I do believe that we have a good chance to; but I also

know that to take over the most possible – whether or not the party – we must **not yet** adopt a split perspective; we must maintain our previous long term perspective.”

Shachtman apparently agreed with Burnham on this “long term perspective.” He elevated the “Eastern experiment” – i.e. alignments with the Militants, now known as the Revolutionary Socialist Education Society [RSES] – to a strategic priority. Developments elsewhere had to be slowed “nationally to the pace of New York,” an approach that led to an “excessively skeptical attitude toward *Labor Action*” and a readiness to capitulate to the Socialist Party centrists out of fear that, under any revolutionary pressure, they would bolt and unleash an attack on Trotskyism. Along with Burnham, and the left-wing New York Yipsel leader, Hal Draper, Shachtman was apparently a Director of the RSES, expressing the view that the Socialist Party was “moving in a revolutionary Marxian direction.” Decades later he insisted that the Trotskyist prospect of “gaining the majority and the leadership” of the SP “was not remote.”²⁶¹

261 The above paragraphs draw on Burnham to Cannon, 3 November 1936; 17 November 1936, in Folders WP: 1–9 November 1936 & 15–30 November 1936, PRL, Socialist Party Entry, Chrono Files, Summer 1935/November – December 1936; Burnham to Cannon, 17 November 1936; Swabeck to Comrade [Cannon], 20 November 1936; Goldman to Cannon, 20 November 1936, Box 4/Folder 1, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Hansen, “The Abern Clique,” 20–25; Max Shachtman, *Behind the Moscow Trial* (New York: Pioneer, 1936), 128. On the RSES, formed in early November 1936 in New York, see “The Left Wing Stands for its Rights in New York,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (15 December 1936), 9–10; and on Directors of the RSES, “The Appeal and the Left Wing,” *Socialist Appeal*, 3 (February 1937), 14. Burnham’s digs at Cannon would later draw the rebuke of the Ohio Cannonists, Ted Selander and Bert Cochran, the latter writing to Swabeck informing him that he had been told “Burnham wrote a letter to Cannon in which he compared the latter’s role in America with that of Molinier in France. If Burnham took his letter seriously, why didn’t he send copies of it around to NEC members. Where in the hell does he think he gets off at, anyway?” Cochran to Swabeck, 12 February 1937, Folder WP: 9–28 February 1937, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1937. Shachtman’s 1968 comment on the positive prospects inside the SP in 1937 appears in Max Shachtman, “Introduction,” *Socialist Appeal: An Organ of Revolutionary Socialism* (New York: Greenwood Reprint Corporation, 1968), and he put forward the view in an extensive 1963 interview that the New York entryist leadership was against the course ultimately recommended by Trotsky: “We felt that we had everything to gain and nothing to lose by remaining in the Socialist Party and continuing our activity as in the past; that a break with the Socialist Party would be at the very best premature.” See “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 263–298, which contains Shachtman’s overall assessment of the SP entry as well as his judgement that the Trotskyist leadership was genuinely ambivalent about how entry would work. “Some of us thought that our stay would be permanent,” and that it would result in winning “over the bulk of the membership to our point of view.” This orientation, Shachtman recalls, “was in my mind.” But so too was another “half-conscious” perspective. “And so, in the back of the minds of almost everyone, to one degree or another,

Cannon responded to Burnham with irony and scorn, referring to “a highly interesting though slightly cockeyed thesis on the party situation,” adding that, “Rose was in some doubt as to whether my laughter was a sign of a returning sense of humor or insanity.” Tired of the reproach, Cannon informed Burnham that he was too busy with developments on the west coast to respond in detail. Things did not improve markedly over late November – December 1936. Anthony Ramuglia denounced Cannon as having set up a party within a party on the west coast. He threatened to break from the Workers Party Club inside the Socialist Party, at the same time as the former AWP unemployed leader was embroiled in an embarrassing financial episode involving an unpaid loan from the League for Mutual Aid, a body Trotskyists George Novack and Felix Morrow were struggling to keep afloat. Right-wing elements in the Los Angeles Socialist Party began to push-back against left-wing activities, protesting an ostensibly unauthorized leaflet on developments in Spain and a lecture by Cannon-backer, Charles Curtiss. Vincent Ray Dunne pleaded with Cannon to attend a proposed Christmas Chicago Plenum, hoping against hope that his old comrade would make the trip east and contribute to bringing entryist order out of what was rapidly descending into a “badly muddled” situation. But Cannon was staying put in California, where he felt his work justified his presence and where he insisted breakthroughs of a kind not understood by those occupying the “swivel chairs” in New York were unfolding. In a lengthy ten-page letter to Vincent, written over the course of two days, Jim repeated his criticisms and staked out his positions, albeit in ways that tried to avoid an absolutist finality. If he had confidence in the leading comrades to endorse his work on the west coast and recognize its importance to the revolutionary movement, Cannon was clearly dismayed by a “familiar tone of bureaucratic complacency, and smug assumption that everything has been alright in the center, and the attempt to make a scapegoat of the one who complains.” Confident that he was “experienced and articulate and can quite easily defend myself against the game of shifting the issue and putting the complainant on trial,” Cannon nevertheless confessed that he was alienated and disappointed. “This is a rotten business any way you look at it,” he wrote. Cannon concluded that, “it does not leave a very good taste in the mouth to wind up a four-month campaign in the field, which has brought such fruitful results for our whole movement,

vaguely perhaps but unmistakably, was the notion that after a certain period of time, the length of which could not be foretold, the SP right wingers would get rid of us, or we would get rid of them.” Retrospectively, Shachtman insisted that when Trotskyists followed the first course, the results were positive, and to the extent that they embraced the second approach the results proved to be “self-delusional” (296, 270).

and find myself on trial ... and compelled to take out some already too busy days to explain and defend myself."²⁶²

From his provincial perch in California, Cannon struggled to address adroitly a number of issues, some of which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. As he continued to promote *Labor Action* and engage with the resident Trotskyist leadership in New York, other matters further complicated the situation. These included Trotsky's move to Mexico and reverberations of the August 1936 Moscow show-trials, which led to discussions of establishing a Trotsky Defense Committee. The ins-and-outs of a propaganda campaign around Spain (with the SP announcing it was sending a battalion of 500 technicians, aviators, etc. to the embattled Civil War front) brought to light fundamental differences between the revolutionary WP entryists and the Socialist leadership. Trade union questions also came to the fore. Internecine union battles heated up over animosities arising from CIO and AFL rivalries. Red-baiting craft union attacks on bodies like Lundeberg's Maritime Federation of the West Coast assailed "outlaw outfits." There were hints of Trotskyist possibilities in the California agricultural sector, where independent unions of Filipinos and Mexicans had arisen and thirsted for militant leadership. All of this complicated the politics of entryism immensely. Much effort was invested in an "Appeal Platform" that was designed to be circulated by Goldman throughout the Socialist Party's left wing circles, but response from the leading cadre of the former Workers Party was lukewarm at best. From Toledo, Sam Pollock wrote that "the entire progressive movement is disorganized, and I have all I can do trying to get the S.P. trade union members to form a fraction, so that we can organize the progressive bloc. The C.P. don't even remotely figure in the picture." Zam and his Militant-origin Revolutionary Socialist Education Society came under attack by the SP's New York leadership, led by Jack Altman, who was moving to the right. This tightened ties between Zam and the New York Trotskyist "Club," which defended the Left-Wing in the pages of the *Socialist Appeal*.

Labor Action's successes secured Cannon some breathing space within New York Trotskyist circles, but Goldman and Dunne, along with Curtiss on the west coast, remained his staunchest supporters, agreeing that the California paper

²⁶² Cannon to Burnham, 20 November 1936; George Novack to Cannon, 21 November 1936; Dunne to Cannon, 21 November 1936; David Stevens to Cannon, 23 November 1936; Robert L. Birchman to Cannon, 25 November 1936; Vincent to Jim, 2 December 1936; Swabeck to Cannon, 3 December 1936; Ramuglia to Comrade, 10 December 1936; Jim to Vincent, 12 December 1936, Box 4/Folder 1, Reel 4, JPC Papers; George Novack to Cannon, 21 November 1936, Folder WP15-30 November 1936, PRL, Chrono File, November – December 1936.

was now a mass organ. They also concurred that Cannon should remain in California, where important strides forward were being made, deflecting claims from the national center that Jim was needed in New York. "The lack of comrade Cannon in the east may temporarily hurt your work, but it helps our work nationally," wrote Curtiss. "Without being at all inclined to any sectional point of view, the fact of the matter is that we have an excellent foothold in California for our work nationally, and any attempt to withdraw comrade Cannon I believe would be disastrous."

Some Cannon advocates, like Goldman, pleaded with him to be more conciliatory to the center, and not to use *Labor Action* in ways that might "give the impression that we are out to kill the *Call*." Usick urged Jim to pay more attention to the Revolutionary Socialist Educational Society, in spite of his distaste for the new body of the New York "Militants." Felix Morrow wrote to Rose that Cannon had been wrong about maneuverings "with the tops in New York," that gains were being registered, and that "everyone here is anxious to put an end to the friction with Jim." The year closed with Swabeck promoting the idea of arranging a "national left-wing conference to have for its purpose the organization of a national left-wing in the party," urging Cannon to give serious thought to the role a "California delegation" would play in such a gathering. In order to reconsolidate "the Club," Swabeck also promoted the idea of a Cannon-Shachtman meeting, either in Mexico, with Trotsky, or in California if Cannon could not make the trip south. Burnham wanted to "straighten out what humps remain, and to give the dead past a chance to bury its dead."²⁶³

As the acrimony between Cannon and the New York "Club" peaked in the fall of 1936, Norman Thomas and the Socialist Party tanked in the 1936 Presidential election. With Old Guard elements resigning from the Party's National Exec-

²⁶³ The above paragraphs draw on Pollock to Cannon, no date [November 1936?]; Pollock to Cannon, 13 December 1936; Richard Fraser to Cannon, 15 December 1936; Herbert Zam to Cannon, 15 December 1936; Goldman to Cannon, 18 December 1936; Usick to Jim, 18 December 1936; Felix Morrow to Rose Karsner, 21 December 1936; Swabeck to Cannon, 22 December 1936; Swabeck to Cannon, 23 December 1936; Burnham to Cannon, 28 December 1936; Morrow to Cannon, 28 December 1936; C. Cornell and W. Henderson to ?, 3 January 1937; Richard Fraser to Cannon, 5 January 1937; Box 4/Folder 1, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Swabeck to Comrades, 11 November 1936, with enclosure of proposed Appeal Platform, "The Road Ahead," in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 4, File 13; Glotzer to Swabeck, 15 November 1936, in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 4, File 13; Dunne to Swabeck, 16 November 1936; Goldman to Swabeck, 27 November 1936; Curtiss to Swabeck, 7 December 1936; Folders WP: 10–14 November 1936, WP: 15–30 November 1936 & WP: 1–14 December 1936, PRL, Chrono File, November–December 1936; Venkataramani, "Leon Trotsky's Adventure in American Radical Politics, 1935–1937," 16; "The Left Wing Stands for its Rights in New York," *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (15 December 1936), 9–10.

utive Committee to plump for Roosevelt, now supported by the Communist Party and many of its CIO organizers, Thomas had a tough time on the hustings. He polled a meagre .4 percent of the votes cast, roughly 22 percent less than his 1932 tally. There was much carping in Old Guard publications such as the *New Leader* that the SP's poor showing could be chalked up to the control of the "Militants" and the disruptive impact of the "Trotskyite" entryists, who were alleged to now dominate the Yipsels. Thomas himself offered a less ideological and more self-reflective post-mortem, its explanatory thrust accenting the acumen of Roosevelt and his capacity to drain away electoral support not only from the Socialists, but also from the Farmer-Labor Party and even from any trade union impetus to establish a labor party. For Thomas, it was imperative to keep the Socialist Party alive as an independent voice of socialist politics.²⁶⁴

Cannon could well have endorsed much of this, although his understandings of what constituted revolutionary socialist independence diverged dramatically from those of Thomas. He remained convinced that too much energy was being "spent in negotiations and palaver with the leaders of the New York 'Militants' group – Zam, Tyler and other Lilliputians of this type, who had absolutely no real power in the party, and whose strategic position was a transitory one rather than that of real influence over the ranks of the party."²⁶⁵ His efforts remained concentrated on the mass work of the Socialist Party, which included *Labor Action*; for the remainder of his life Cannon continued to proudly promote the publication as an exemplary "Trotskyist agitational paper." But Cannon's Californian oar was also very much turned in the seas of electoral politics, this being central to his appreciation of the SP's mass work. He spoke at 19 election meetings throughout the state. His journalism in this period included a 1936 election post-mortem, in which he pilloried the ravages of capitalist poverty, unemployment, and war, attacking those who would paper over the realities of a politics driven by exploitation and oppression: the "labor lieutenants of the Democratic Party, ... Old Guard Socialists, and the Roosevelt communists." Anything but pessimistic about the socialist defeat at the polls, Cannon stressed the activism and growing militancy of a minority of revolutionary socialists. They were taking their message to the people with increasing effectiveness: the Young People's Socialist Alliance conducted a successful summer school in Marxist education; a Workers Defense League was established on

264 Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 202–206; Ross, *The Socialist Party of America*, 376; Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America*, 247–250; Norman Thomas, "Confidential Memorandum, 6 November 1936," in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 16, File 13, Folder WP: 1–9 November 1936, PRL, Chrono File, November – December 1936.

265 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 238.

a non-partisan basis to defend basic workers' rights of assembly and freedom of speech. Amid the poor showing of Thomas and the Socialist Party, Cannon called for the building of a "workers' party that told the truth and keeps on telling it."²⁶⁶

The Christmas Chicago Plenum that the New York Trotskyist leadership tried to convene in the interests of bridging the gulf now separating east and west coasts never happened. The proposed conference of the Socialist Party Left-Wing, similarly, crashed. Altman continued his ongoing attacks on Zam and the RSES, consolidating a Right Centrist grouping that Left Centrists such as Zam maneuvered around by double-crossing their Trotskyist supporters in New York. Cannon's jaundiced view of investing too much in dubious "alliances" seemed confirmed, and there was little appetite, from Chicago to California, for including figures like Zam and Gus Tyler in any Left-wing conference organized by former Workers Party members. To consolidate something before a threatening Socialist Party convention in March, the Trotskyists instead called for an 'Appeal Institute' gathering in Chicago in late February 1937, open to all left-wingers.

Before any such conference, however, Swabeck and the New York center were desperate to try to patch things up with Cannon, proposing at the end of December 1936 that, with Shachtman and George Novack departing for Mexico to make arrangements for Trotsky's relocation there, a productive meeting might be arranged. Swabeck, convinced that any friction and difference that existed must be the result of misunderstandings, believed that comradely discussions with Shachtman, adjudicated by Trotsky, could put the difficulties to rest.²⁶⁷ With Cannon embroiled in the west coast maritime strike, editing *Labor Action*, and weary of what seemed back-and-forth correspondence with New York, nothing came of Swabeck extending this olive branch.

Shachtman wrote to Cannon from Mexico City on 20 January 1937:

L.D. is of the opinion that **the** most important thing now is for the committee in New York to wipe out whatever misunderstandings there may be between it and yourself primarily by means of personal and informal discussion; that the means must be exhausted to the end before any formal discussion occurs, at, let us say, a plenum; and that meanwhile every effort

²⁶⁶ James P. Cannon, "Is Everybody Happy," *Labor Action*, 28 November 1936; Cannon, "In the Spirit of the Pioneers," *Labor Action*, 28 November 1936; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 243–245.

²⁶⁷ Swabeck to Cannon, 23 December 1936, Folder WP:15–31 December 1936, PRL, Chrono File, November – December 1936.

should be made to put a decisive stop to any further development of friction between the two coasts.

As the first step in such a process, Shachtman proposed a “flying visit” to San Francisco and Los Angeles. He would speak on the Moscow Trials but spend the bulk of his time in conversations with Cannon: “I feel confident that the two or three days we will spend together will go a long way towards resolving a very dangerous situation.” In a letter to Dunne written the same day, which Shachtman described as “exceptional ... urgent and unpostponeable,” a rapprochement of Cannon and his New York comrades was said to be “imperative if we are to garner the fruits of our work in the SP and not have them rot in our hands.” Shachtman implored Dunne to “borrow, beg, or steal” the money to meet him in San Francisco at the beginning of February, the Minneapolis comrade’s presence in the meetings with Cannon being necessary if “an otherwise inevitable faction fight” was to be avoided. “I cannot stress sufficiently the urgency of this request,” Shachtman wrote, “which is not so much mine as it is LD.s.” Shachtman, however, never made the trip, pleading that delay of the visit to Cannon was necessitated by work associated with the Trotsky Defense Committee. Dunne was deeply disturbed, seeing in this “absolutely unsatisfactory” rescheduling of Trotsky’s advised “western trip” a handcuffing of American Trotskyists at a particularly dire moment:

The new development of the Moscow trials and Trotsky’s presence in Mexico guarantees in advance that the enormous resources of the Comintern in its struggle against Trotsky and all of us will be turned so far as that is possible to America and will use the machine of the American C.P. in an attempt to complete their cowardly criminal objectives. The pressure that will be felt by the right, the centrists, and the left-centrists inside the S.P. from this apparatus shifting by the Stalinists will be enormous. This may, it seems to me, must at least to a certain extent change our tactical approach to the realization of our former and even present aims inside the S.P. I am not sure that the New York comrades fully appreciate this.

Insisting that what was required was “an analysis of the entire American and world situation brought down to practical political fighting,” Dunne thought Cannon “the only comrade in America whom we can rely upon,” and pressed him to meet with Shachtman and “responsible Minneapolis comrades” before the Appeal Institute meeting.²⁶⁸

268 [Burnham?] to Abern, 21 January 1937; Shachtman to Cannon, 20 January 1937; Dunne to

17 The Return of the Prodigal Agitator

As 1936 gave way to 1937 the long maritime workers' strike unfolded in ways that proclaimed a Trotskyist influence among dockworkers and seamen. The first issues of *Labor Action* appeared, the weekly hailed by many as a mass paper that "sparkled." Trotsky declared the first four issues of Cannon's paper "An excellent beginning," one that promised future "great success." It was even given some reluctant kudos by Norman Thomas. Cannon's initiatives on the west coast began to register, and his health gave signs of improving. All of this broke down some of the foot-dragging within the New York-based Club with respect to all-out support for *Labor Action*, now recognized as an invaluable complement to Goldman's *Socialist Appeal*.²⁶⁹

Resentments and acrimony nonetheless festered, with Cannon withdrawing somewhat from correspondence with the New York center. Swabeck wrote to Glotzer in mid-December that "we have not heard from Cannon for some time." Discussions of the Appeal Platform document, "The Road Ahead," generated some consternation related to its publication in the *Socialist Appeal* and the tallying up of who had signed and not signed letters of endorsement. Innuendo and worse emanated from New York, suggesting that the Workers Party Club was fractured into a "dual organization," in which there was now a California "center" dominated by a "Cannon clique." Young west coast militants such as Edward Everett wrote to Swabeck to dispel any such notion, adding further that he had hoped that **"THE SON OF A BITCH THEORY, (CANNON IS A SCHEMING S. OF B.) WOULD DISAPPEAR. NOW IT APPEARS THIS THEORY IS BEING REVIVED IN QUARTERS MOST UNEXPECTED."** Cochran tore a strip off Swabeck, an Ohio letter of 12 February 1937 referring to recent events offering a "condemnation of the course pursued by you comrades in New York for the past months." The Club pitch coming from New York and Chicago was for a Social-

Cannon, 1 February 1937; Shachtman to Ray Sparrow, 20 January 1937; Swabeck to Cannon, 25 January 1937 [misdated 25 February 1937], Box 4/Folder 2/Reel 4, JPC Papers; Glotzer to Swabeck and Burnham, 4 January 1937, in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 2 File 6; Goldman to Burnham, 5 January 1937; Shachtman to Dunne, 20 January 1937; Dunne to Swabeck, 5 February 1937, in Folders WP: 1-13 January 1937, 20-31 January 1937 & 19 February 1937, PRL, Socialist Party Entry, Chrono File, January - October 1937; Glotzer to Burnham and Swabeck, 20 January 1937; Glotzer to Burnham, 22 January 1937, "General Organizational and Secretarial Correspondence, 1923-1956," Boxes 15-16/Reels 20-21, JPC Papers.

269 Goldman to Cannon, 18 December 1936; Usick to Jim, 18 December 1936; Norman Thomas to Cannon and Trimble, 16 December 1936; Trotsky to Cannon, 20 February 1937, "International Files," General Correspondence, 1931-1963, Box 20/Folders 1-9, Reel 26, JPC Papers.

ist Party Plenum or Conference of the national Left-wing, held sufficiently in advance of the March 1937 gathering of the SP to allow the revolutionary entry-ists to “present and fight for our ideas.” Such a gathering could serve as “the convention” that might crystallize “an organized body of left wing opinion both influential and effective in counteracting any attacks upon us.” This was not opposed by Cannon and Trimble. But neither was it hailed with much enthusiasm.

Trimble wrote to Swabeck that while he and Cannon would not argue “against the full desirability of a conference,” it could not, given the haste with which it was being proposed, procedural matters of electing delegates, and, most critically, financial and organizational inhibitions, be properly constituted on a national basis. California, other sections of the west, and southern socialists were unable to attend. “I’m afraid you’ll have to count us out, except as we can help by correspondence and our full endorsement of the plan,” reported Trimble. As private correspondence between Rose Karsner and Felix Morrow revealed, tensions between leading comrades in New York and Chicago and Cannon were anything but resolved amid a December 1936 truce that seemed premised on a cooling of communications. Morrow expressed surprise that Rose complained “about the attempt to call a plenum,” as this was “the best method of solving the disagreements, particularly in the sharp form they took a month ago,” adding, for good measure that, “Cannon was wrong about our maneuvering with the tops in NY; it has been of enormous value.” Calling attention to Cannon’s “way of expressing himself very caustically,” Morrow closed, “You can tell Jim for me that he knows very well that I admire and trust him above any of the leading comrades, but that it is my considered opinion that precisely because of his unquestioned authority, he must bear a good deal of responsibility for an unpleasant number of weeks.”²⁷⁰

Meanwhile, figures like Norman Thomas and Gus Tyler were making noises about “the Trotskyite problem in the Party.” Thomas danced around the contro-

270 The above paragraphs draw on Swabeck to Glotzer, 17 December 1936; [Swabeck?] to Cannon and Dunne, 18 December 1936; Goldman to Cannon, 18 December 1936; Curtiss to Comrade [Swabeck?], 18 December 1936; Ramuglia to Swabeck, 19 December 1936; Morrow to Karsner, 21 December 1936; Swabeck to Cannon, 22 December 1936; Swabeck to Cannon, 23 December 1936; Trimble to Swabeck, no date [late December 1936/January 1937; [Swabeck?] to Selander, 30 December 1936; Goldman to Burnham, 5 January 1937; Swabeck to Everett, 7 January 1937; Cochran to Swabeck, 12 February 1937. Folders WP: 15–31 December 1936, WP: 1–13 January 1937 & 9–28 February 1937, PRL, Chrono Files, November – December 1936 & January – October 1937. “The Road Ahead: A Draft Platform of the Socialist Party,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (December 1936), 1–6, appeared over the signatures of 20 left-wing SP members, including Burnham, Cannon, Shachtman, and Trimble.

versy in a letter to Trimble and Cannon, suggesting that it was all “a problem of manners and attitudes,” citing “Endless debates without time limits, utter failure to discriminate in the importance of issues, intolerance, wrangling in the spirit of third period communism.” All of this, claimed Thomas rather condescendingly “was largely responsible for the failure of the Workers’ Party to grow” and “No good will come of repeating what happened in the Workers Party in the Socialist Party.” Tyler, less Olympian in his discontents, took Goldman to task for publishing the Appeal Platform without consulting the “Militants,” who would have pushed to give it a “broader basis.” He disliked the *Appeal’s* backhanded appreciations of the new *Call*, now edited by Tyler, which he claimed was in effect being dismissed and boycotted by those supporting the Appeal Platform. “Roughly I may say that you over-estimate entirely the power of Stalinism and underestimate completely the power of homespun reformism of the variety of the Labor Non-Partisan League, American Labor Party, Farmer Labor Party – as such the American tradition of class collaboration, etc.,” Tyler wrote. He closed with the insistence, “for Christs sake let us have a little bit of consultation before you jump off the deep end so that we may have a maximum of unity among sound left wing forces, and a minimum of unnecessary dissension.” Frank Trager, Labor and Organization Secretary of the Socialist Party, stirred up a hornet’s nest of controversy after a Workers Alliance of America convention in St. Paul took on the trappings of a Communist Party campaign against the Trotskyist-led Federal Workers Section [FWS]. Blaming the victim, Trager saw the FWS leadership of the Minneapolis Drivers’ Union, Local 544, as thwarting the unity of the jobless movement in Minnesota. With Socialist Party figureheads calling for a severance of relations of the FWS and the General Drivers’ Union, Minneapolis’s Trotskyists were forced to defend “the direct organizational tie-up between the employed and the unemployed” as it had developed out of the Teamsters’ struggles of 1934. They regarded this fundamental working-class unity as “essential for the effective stability of the unemployed movement,” the undermining of which “is directly adverse to the best interests of the Minnesota SP” as well as the local jobless movement. Even Earl Browder did his best to stir the pot of animosity against the Workers Party entryists, calling for the expulsion of this “counter-revolutionary” contingent, and offering to “consult with the best elements in the Socialist Party about their problems in the most helpful way.”²⁷¹

²⁷¹ Tyler to Goldman, 18 December 1936; Thomas to Cannon and Trimble, 18 December 1936; Memorandum to Frank Trager, 7 January 1937, in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 16, File 13; Dunne to Swabeck, 14 January 1937, Folders WP: 15–31 December 1936, 1–13 January 1937 & 14–19 January 1937, PRL, Chrono Files, November – December 1936 & January – Octo-

Things simmered into the new year. Dunne wrote to Swabeck that he was “completely amazed at the documents from Comrade Burnham and yourself addressed to Comrade Cannon in California. ... I think one can say that these documents indicate an absolute and complete lack of understanding of the real significance of the decisions made by our comrades upon our entry into the Socialist Party. Did we not at that time definitely speak of a period of more or less extended integration into the work of the Socialist Party? Was it not understood that this meant specifically that we were to seize every opportunity for mass work not only to build the Socialist Party but to prove by this activity that we specifically have the correct outlook not only as revolutionary Socialists from an inner party point of view but that also applies to building the party through mass work?” Dunne pointed to Cannon’s gains, with the opportunity presenting itself of not only advancing “the Party by taking in hundreds of mass workers and virtually gaining control of the movement (as in California),” but also with launching a “weekly organ under official auspices.” At a California convention of the SP, resolutions adopted had a decidedly revolutionary ring, counter-posing the politics of the Workers’ United Front of Action to the People’s Front, and rejecting “contemptuously” the “insolent demand” of the Communist Party that former members of the Workers Party be expelled from the ranks of the state’s socialists. The Minneapolis Trotskyist was therefore astounded that, “The comrades somehow or other seem suddenly to have forgotten our whole principal outlook in this matter and attempt to find in this work an indication of a splitting policy on the part of Comrade Cannon.” As Dunne unloaded on Swabeck, others wrote to Cannon, indicating that, in spite of the machinations of Zam and Company, there were still those who felt it imperative, with Goldman, Glotzer, Swabeck, and Burnham staking out this claim in various ways, to create and maintain a bloc with the left centrists, including Zam, who was arguably the most irksomely disingenuous. This inclination was driven by the conviction that Jack Altman was consolidating a reformist faction, calling, in Swabeck’s words, “for a struggle against the Trotskyists, which in reality means conciliation with Stalinism. ... [T]he Altman group represents the right wing ... [and] is the main obstacle in the struggle for a revolutionary course for the party.” Zam’s group, standing between the left-wing Trotskyists and a reconstituted right-wing of Altmanites, represented a fragile and untenable faction that, in Swabeck’s view, had the potential to “accept a Marxist program” that would allow it to “unite with the left wing.”²⁷²

ber 1937; James Burnham, “His Excellency’s Loyal Opposition,” *Socialist Appeal*, 3 (January 1937), 5.

272 Dunne to Swabeck, 14 January 1937; [Goldman?] to Cannon, 19 January 1937; Glotzer to

Cannon, his time consumed for months with getting *Labor Action* off the ground and providing input into the lengthy west-coast Maritime Federation strike that pitted Lundeborg and Mayes against Bridges and the Communist Party, was somewhat more free to reflect on what lay ahead when the maritime job action ended in early February 1937. The clash between the Sailors Union of the Pacific and other maritime unions with the ship owners had been pivotal to the establishment of *Labor Action*. But with the conflict terminated, the newspaper was, to Cannon's chagrin, on its last legs, reduced to appearing intermittently. Cannon wrote to Trotsky on 3 March 1937, stressing how much the experience convinced him that the American Trotskyists, regardless of their relationship to the Socialist Party, needed their own weekly organ:

It has appeared to me that this question of the estimation of the role of the press – and not simply and merely the *internal* press but the *public* press – has been at the bottom of the disputes between me and the comrades in New York. They gave only a grudging consent to my participation in this enterprise, but I think they have since changed their attitude. The effect of the weekly publication of *Labor Action* has been too pronounced to admit of any doubt as to its value and necessity to the revolutionary current of the party.

I only fear that the new developments in the party will rob me of the possibility of remaining **here** and carrying this task through, for I was never a sectarian and never loved internal party politics for its own sake. The **eight** months I have spent in California, mainly devoted to agitational mass work, have been a welcome change of atmosphere. For me it was a sort of profitable play like that of the Irish Catholic who got a job 'burning down protestant churches and getting paid for it.'²⁷³

Burnham and Swabeck, 20 January 1937; [Swabeck? or Burnham?] to Abern, 21 January 1937; Glotzer to Burnham, 22 January 1937 Box 2, File 6; Dunne to Swabeck, 1 February 1937, Folders WP: 14–19 January 1937, 20–31 January 1937 & 1–9 February 1937, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1937. See also "Resolutions Adopted by State Convention: Socialist Party of California Recommends Revolutionary Program to National Convention," *Labor Action*, 27 February 1937; Glen Trimble, "Class Struggle or the People's Front: Two Conceptions of Socialist Policy," *Socialist Appeal*, 30 January 1937; Swabeck to Selander, 1 February 1937, "General Organizational and Secretarial Correspondence, 1923–1956," Boxes 15–16/Reels 20–21, JPC Papers.

273 Cannon to Trotsky, 3 March 1937, from Leon Trotsky Papers, Harvard University, in Folder WP: March 1937, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1937.

This commitment to the necessity of the revolutionary communist press, regardless of geographical locale, was something Cannon also tried to impress upon younger comrades, writing to Morrow that, "Our people in New York might learn something from the history of the original left wing in 1918. At that time also the anti-revolutionary bureaucracy held New York in an iron grip. The left wing broke through in Massachusetts and published the *Revolutionary Age* from there. With the aid of this paper they eventually broke through New York too."²⁷⁴

Deeply disappointed that New York's leading comrades had not supported *Labor Action* as he felt they should, Cannon was committed to continue the publication, if not as a weekly, then as a semi-monthly, until the Socialist Party convention in March 1937. The ongoing presence of *Labor Action*, he reasoned, was absolutely imperative given that all indications were that the Trotskyist welcome in the SP, never really all that congenial, was wearing exceedingly thin. Norman Thomas, obviously tiring of Trotskyist militancy and influence over the Socialist Party youth, was voicing concern and using his column in the *Call*, "At the Front," to register his growing unease with a discernible faction that he insisted "have to be watched," lest the convention descend into wrangling over "a Trotskyite or an anti-Trotskyite program." Erstwhile "Militants," such as New York's Altman and Wisconsin's Paul Porter, shed their left dress, gravitated to the right, and were taking direct aim at "Trotskyite sectarians," spoiling for expulsion. Porter, in particular, reversed his position of November 1934, in which he offered a report to the National Executive Committee of the SP advocating that all on the United States left *except* the Communist Party (the AWP, the CLA, the IWW, the Lovestoneites) unite with Socialists in common work. Two years later he was enticing those whom he could influence to support the Socialist Party aligning with Stalinists in the Popular Front. The left centrist contingent, led by Zam, Gus Tyler, and Robert and Max Delson, formed their own caucus. It controlled the *Call*, which was functioning, according to Burnham, as a "straight factional organ" that more often than not refused articles from the Workers Party entryists. Zam and Tyler were also embarking on the publication of *Socialist Clarity*, the first number of which would appear on 1 March 1937. If the Clarity group could agree with the Trotskyists on certain issues, central of which at the time was a deep suspicion of the prospects of an American Labor Party contributing to the development of the revolutionary movement, Zam and Company were anything but receptive to building the

274 Cannon to Morrow, 12 November 1936, Folder WP: 10–14 November 1936, PRL, Chrono File, November – December 1936.

Fourth International. This ostensible Socialist Party Left-wing also differed with the former Workers Party elements on a host of other issues.

One of the most important divergences related to Spain, where the SP supported the Popular Front, sustaining its Left-Wing led by Largo Caballero. Trotskyists of course opposed this orientation, calling attention to Stalinist military assault on dissident revolutionaries and entities not aligned directly with the Comintern, such as the Workers Party of Marxist Unification [POUM]. All of this set the stage for the Appeal Institute gathering in Chicago at the end of February 1937, preparations for which were undertaken largely by Goldman, Glotzer, Abern and a range of Illinois SP left-wingers.

Cannon concluded that, given the possibility of imminent expulsion from the Socialist Party, it was necessary for him to return to New York, working with other comrades, including Dunne, to convince Thomas not to be pressured by Altman and Porter to oust the Trotskyists. Gains registered in the entryist experiment needed some time to settle. The problem, however, was that Cannon was in his usual state of financial exigency. He needed to secure funds from New York to finance his departure from California, and he was insistent that commitments made to finance *Labor Action*, desperately needed as an organ of propaganda in what appeared to be a forthcoming war of position, be honored.²⁷⁵

Some of this happened, and Cannon communicated with Trotsky, soliciting his more direct involvement in writing for the *Socialist Appeal* on subjects such as Spain and the Moscow Trials. "We want to begin from the start to accustom

275 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon to Comrades, 3 February 1937; Cannon to Dunne, 6 February 1937; Cannon to Comrades, 7 February 1937; Goldman to Burnham, 9 February 1937; Usick to Jim, 10 February 1937; Dunne to Cannon, 10 February 1937; Usick to Jim, 25 February 1937, Box 4/Folders 2–3, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Thomas to Trimble, 27 January 1937; "Report on Altman Caucus," 31 January 1937; Burnham to Glotzer, 4 February 1937 & 9 February 1937, in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 2, File 6; Glotzer to Swabeck, 10 February 1937; Dunne to Swabeck, 10 February 1937; Abern to Swabeck, 10 February 1937, Folders WP: 20–31 January 1937, 1–9 February 1937 & 9–28 February 1937, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1937; Ross, *The Socialist Party of America*, 355; Warren, *Alternative Vision*, 84–85; Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 203; Seidler, *Norman Thomas*, 173–175; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 130; M.S. Venkataramani, "American Socialists, the Roosevelt Administration, and the Spanish Civil War," *International Studies*, 3 (April 1962), 395–424. Cannon did not want to be "too conspicuous in New York," keeping his and Dunne's meeting with Thomas quiet, but he was still concerned about the New York "Club's" relations with the more left-inflected elements in the Socialist Party, suggesting to Swabeck: "It might be a good idea for me to have a personal meeting with some of the Centrist city slickers. If you have not been traded out of your shirts you can be sure that I will not give them away." See Cannon to Swabeck, 9 March 1937, Folder WP: March 1937, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1937.

the Socialists to your intervention on the most important political questions," Cannon wrote.²⁷⁶

Returning to New York, Cannon and Dunne (who had a prior relationship of affability with Thomas, the two men and their wives having spent time together as the SP leader was driven to speaking engagements by the Minneapolis Trotskyist), were appointed a committee of two to confer with the Socialist Party leaders. These included not only Thomas, but also Militant-Clarity figurehead, Gus Tyler, and the Trotskyists' most strident opponents, Altman and Murray Baron. These meetings, meant to delay a showdown and insure that the March Socialist Party conference would not culminate in an expulsion melee, were largely successful. Cannon and Dunne agreed to a number of concessions, including ending branch meetings at 11 o'clock at night, thereby placating those who claimed that the former Workers Party members were monopolizing comrades' time, demanding tirelessly prolonged theoretical and political discussions. "Conciliatory and inoffensive," Cannon and Dunne secured a commitment from Thomas that they would not be expelled for their ideas and that their publication, *Socialist Appeal*, would not be suppressed. But there was no denying the antagonism that was surfacing within the Socialist Party to the Workers Party entryists, who were targeted as a minority of disrupters: "Trotskyites must either accept majority rule or leave the party," declared one Altmanite, while complaints of sectarianism and efforts to turn the Socialist Party into "an anti-Stalin" organization were commonplace. Indicative of the hardening opposition was a February 1937 statement at an Altman Caucus meeting: "Trotskyites must leave the party or wreck it. It is not a question of how this is to be done, whether legally or not. Even a reign of terror might be necessary and desirable for this purpose." Zam, perhaps with his sensitive finger in the air, determining which way the political winds were blowing, backed away from any bloc with the entryist left wing, although this would not preclude him maneuvering in ways that seemingly, on particular questions, defended revolutionists against the most rightest elements in the Socialist Party.

The Cannon-Dunne truce talks happened at roughly the same time that the Appeal Institute gathering in Chicago convened, with 100 delegates present, committing themselves to a definite Left-wing organization distinct from the established right and centrist factions, both of which had official observers present at the event. Policies on the labor party, trade unions, and the withdrawal from the Second International (the most controversial within the entry-

276 Cannon to Trotsky, 19 February 1937, quoted in Venkataramani, "Leon Trotsky's Adventure in American Radical Politics, 1935-1937," 17.

ist "Club," and something that Cannon had cautioned the New York leadership not to push) were the subject of resolutions. Attacks on Trotskyist sectarianism "fell flat," according to Shachtman, who thought the event a great success. Shachtman was convinced that the "convention prospects – win or lose – look very good to me," his overly optimistic view being that the Altman wing of the Party had been somewhat marginalized. "This is not the time to stand on ceremony or to continue writing your tolerably irascible (and irritating) notes," Shachtman chastised Cannon, closing with his "regards and good will." Burnham was described to Cannon as "drunk with the Institute victory," an assessment that fit with the New York intellectual's ongoing overly positive assessment of the possibilities for a Trotskyist take-over of the Socialist Party. Cannon, for the most part, was "satisfied with the results of the Appeal Conference," writing to Trotsky that he was gratified that a genuine left wing seemed in the making, some wavering elements won over, and "our relations to the centrist group of Zam ... precisely determined." But Cannon remained much concerned about "the determined drive of the reformist wing of the party to expel us at the forthcoming [SP] convention."²⁷⁷

Others, such as John G. Wright, George Clarke, and Morris Lewit, were even more circumspect. Wright, for instance, wrote to Cannon at the end of February, painting a picture of impending crisis in broad strokes of doom and gloom. His reading of the political tea leaves, which included a close examination of the *Socialist Call*, scrutiny of the Wisconsin-based, Stalinist-sympathetic Paul Porter pamphlet, *Which Way Forward for the Socialist Party* (1937), assessment of the Daniel Hoan-Earl Browder alliance consolidating in the same state, and analysis of a Communist Party broadside, "Appeal to the Socialists," was unequivocal. "There is not the slightest doubt in my mind," wrote Wright, that

²⁷⁷ The above paragraphs draw on Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 247–248; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 131; Venkataramani, "Leon Trotsky's Adventure in American Radical Politics, 1935–1937," 17–18; Cannon to Comrades (New York), 3 February 1937, opposing the approach to the Internationals adopted by Shachtman and Burnham; Shachtman to Cannon, 23 February 1937, Box/Folders 2–4, Reel 4, JPC Papers. Shachtman's assessment of the situation inside the SP understated the level of anti-Trotskyist vitriol evident in the Altman caucus, where a 7 February 1937 meeting had revealed strong views on the Workers Party entry, quoted above. Cannon and the Appeal Institute were attacked as sectarian, and SP stalwarts deplored admitting the WP militants. See Altman Caucus Notes, 7 February 1937, Folder 25, PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee. On the Dunne-Thomas relation, solidified in October 1936 with public meetings in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Fargo, North Dakota, see Dunne to Cannon, 14 October 1936, Folder WP: October 1936, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1936. Cannon's summing up of the Appeal Institute gathering's accomplishments appears in Cannon to Trotsky, 3 March 1937, in Leon Trotsky Papers, Harvard University, Folder WP: March 1937, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1937.

“a concerted drive to expell [sic] us at the March convention” is underway “as the first step in liquidating the party into a People’s Front.” Porter provided a formula for such an expulsion, declaring in his short tract that the Workers Party had entered the Socialist Party surreptitiously, without proper procedural request for admission from a National Convention, the only body that could authorize “a merger with another party.” The “claim of the Trotskyists that they had disbanded the Workers Party before joining ours” was “manifestly an artifice,” claimed Porter. Clarke and Lewit also saw much danger ahead for the late March conference, and complained to Cannon about the freelancing of Shachtman and Burnham. Particularly troubling was the New York duo’s insistence on raising the issue of withdrawal from the Second International, which alienated some of the Appeal Institute delegates and appeared, according to these critics, as something of a “bombshell,” dropped at an evening meeting after midnight. Such skeptics worried that Thomas had gone over to Altman, and feared that at the March convention the Trotskyists would have insignificant and weak delegate representation. Having returned to California thinking that he had perhaps neutralized Thomas and the most vitriolic opponents of the Trotskyist entryists, Cannon was yet again besieged to return to New York, Lewit and Clarke writing:

Our immediate task is to consolidate our forces on the basis of positions we have thus far advanced and made clear, a bloc with all anti-split elements and insofar as possible to neutralize Thomas. We feel that the manner in which the international question was raised at the 11th hour militates against the successful carrying out of this line. There is still time to remedy the situation. If you feel with us on this question, your immediate intervention will prove decisive. Your presence in N.Y. for a week or two prior to the National Convention would be of inestimable value. If your health permits, no other consideration should stand in the way of your coming. Needless to say, your leadership in negotiations, in planning convention strategy, and in raising the morale of our forces would be of tremendous importance. Let us add that this opinion is shared by Vincent Dunne.²⁷⁸

278 John G. Wright [Usick] to Jim, 25 February 1937; Lewit and Clarke to Cannon, 26 February 1937, Box 4/Folders 2–4/Reel 4, JPC Papers; Albert Goldman, “The Appeal Institute,” *Socialist Appeal*, 3 (March 1937), 36–39; “Resolutions Adopted at Appeal Institute,” *Socialist Appeal*, 3 (March 1937), 40. The *Socialist Appeal*, 3 (February 1937); 3 (March 1937) contain full discussions of various positions and resolutions addressed and adopted at the Appeal Institute gathering. See also, Workers Party, Minutes of Socialist Appeal Insti-

Wright concurred, imploring Cannon to “ACT in the emergency,” insisting that, “The man to give the political answer must be the banner bearer of our organization. ... the situation demands above all leadership – from you Jim. You must jump into the breach.” Trotsky himself concurred, writing to Cannon that all consideration of the importance of his initiatives in California aside, “your presence in New York and your direct participation in the work seems to me of the *greatest importance*.”²⁷⁹

As the March 1937 Socialist Party Convention neared, then, the situation was quite volatile, recognized as such by the Trotskyists in the entryist “Club” and the more mainstream leadership, “Militant” and otherwise, among the Socialists.²⁸⁰ The left-centrists of the Clarity group ended up as the most influential bloc in the convention, although the Trotskyists of the Appeal Group were perhaps the most staunchly coherent presence. Of a total of 150 delegates attending, a maximum of 135 present at any given time, roughly 50–60 were Clarityites. Had they been a firmly united group their control of the proceedings would have been decisive, but under the pressures of hard-fought debates and resolutions marked by contentious and sharply posed differences, the Clarity group tended to fracture. Its loose membership was given to vacillation, with a smaller core of 25–30 delegates remaining firm in convictions their faction managed to preserve. Abern wrote to Joe Hansen that, “The showing of the Clarityites in the NC of the SP was miserable and it was demonstrated that there was no such thing as a Clarity majority at the NC.” If the Appeal Group, at 27 in number, was significantly smaller than their ostensible left-wing Clarity counterparts, they voted as a disciplined contingent, apparently never breaking ranks. The new right wing was divided into differentiated camps: a Stalinist-inflected, popular frontist Wisconsin delegation of 25–30 that took constant aim at the “Trotskyites” of the Appeal Group, while the Massachusetts and Altman-led New

tute, 20–22 February 1937, Folder 25, PRL, Workers Party, Political Committee. Warren, *An Alternative Vision*, 150–152, discusses the influence of Paul Porter’s pamphlet, *Which Way for the Socialist Party* (1937). Cannon and Swabeck corresponded about the Porter publication as Cannon was en route to New York. Cannon concluded: “I read the Porter pamphlet carefully, and also noted the comment of the *Call* editorial board. The flagrantly Stalinist orientation of the Porter pamphlet makes it very difficult for even the Altmanites to go along with him. If we come out of the convention with the status quo we will be alright.” See Cannon to Swabeck, 9 March 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: March 1937, PRL. What appear to be Cannon’s notes on the Porter pamphlet are in “Paul Porter’s Pamphlet,” no date, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: 1937, from JPC Papers, Reel 4, PRL.

279 Trotsky to Cannon, 9 March 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 226–227.

280 See, for instance, Harry W. Laidler, “The Socialist Convention: Opportunity and Challenge,” *American Socialist Monthly*, 6 (February 1937), 12.

York representation stood at 7–10 for each state. Smaller out-of-the-way delegations were most often composed of rightward leaning SP members, and overall Norman Thomas could count on these types, in conjunction with the representatives from Massachusetts and New York, as well as break-aways from the Clarity Group, to secure his leadership. But the Trotskyists of the Appeal Group lived to fight another day, albeit in ways that were constrained and that left them largely disenfranchised in the governing bodies of the Socialist Party.²⁸¹

Reluctant to see the Trotskyists expelled, being shrewd enough to know that they perhaps needed a resolute left wing to cover their flank from attack by the likes of Porter and Altman, Zam, Tyler, and the Clarityites also appreciated the need to curb the growing Trotskyist capacity to exercise independence in the Party. The self-styled “Militants” were not unaware of how this autonomy was welcomed by potentially revolutionary sections of the Socialists, especially the youth. Controlling the main Party organ, the *Call*, the Clarity Group called upon Thomas to back away from his commitment to Cannon and Dunne not to suppress the *Socialist Appeal*, and a resolution was passed liquidating all “factional publications.” As Shachtman later noted with disdain, this was “absolutely unprecedented in the Socialist Party,” where all tendencies had long exercised the right to issue their own publications.²⁸²

The Clarity group also bowed to pressure from the right-wing New York and Wisconsin delegates, who insisted that Cannon, Dunne, and others, even Goldman, not be given any seats on the Party’s leading bodies, the National Executive Committee or the National Action Committee. Zam and Company were in fact backed by the Appeal Group, which “insisted from the beginning that the Clarity Group take a majority” of the seats on the national committees, its delegate strength warranting this, but the principle followed was not reciprocated. Instead, “Clarity chose to take a majority without giving any representation whatsoever to the Appeal,” in spite of its proven strength at the Convention, where it registered anywhere from one-quarter to one-sixth of the conference’s voting strength. Cannon, stung by this backtracking and maneuvering, nevertheless decided to bide his time, largely because it gave the entryists a small measure of breathing space in which to secure and extend the gains of their movement into the Socialist Party. But he did so without the journalistic fanfare of Shachtman, whose presentation of the proceedings in the *American Social-*

281 See the assessments and break down of voting strengths relating to the March Convention in Shachtman to Bill, 9 April 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder: WP, April 1937, PRL.

282 “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 277–280; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 248–249.

ist Monthly offered little criticism and conveyed the false suggestion that the Socialist Party was on the correct revolutionary road, a politics of concession animated by a desire to solidify relations with an ostensible Clarityite left-wing. This infuriated Trotsky and Cannon.²⁸³

The latter wrote to Carter at the end of April 1937, that, "It is as utopian to expect that the Socialist Party will progressively and fully evolve to the position of a revolutionary Marxist Party as [to rely] on the peaceful evolution of capitalism to socialism. In each a "revolution" must occur. We must drill all our forces in this situation and not allow them to get soft and nourish illusions."²⁸⁴

Shachtman's whitewashing of what happened at the SP Convention, and his unduly positive promotion of the revolutionary possibilities inside the Norman Thomas-led Party drew Trotsky's confidential rebuke. The Old Man wrote to Cannon and Shachtman from Mexico condemning the opportunistic adaptation to centrism, however "critical." In line with past concerns about Shachtman's inclinations, Trotsky castigated "the purely literary appreciation" and "pure charlatanism" animating the affirmative substance of the outline of the convention and its meaning. Shachtman's claim that the Socialist Party was "closer to the position of revolutionary Marxism than any part of the Second or Third International," Trotsky dismissed as an "absolutely unmerited compliment." In contrast, Trotsky insisted that the SP was evolving into a centrist abomination devoid of programmatic clarity. It was even more backward than

283 Gus Tyler, "The Socialist Convention Lays Basis for Rooting Party in Mass Struggles," *Socialist Call*, 3 (10 April 1937), 2, 6; "Resolutions Go Left; Convention Repudiates Disrupters," *Labor Action*, 17 April 1937; Samuel Romer and Hal Siegel, "Advance in Chicago," *American Socialist Monthly*, 6 (May 1937), 9–12; Max Shachtman, "Towards a Revolutionary Socialist Party," *American Socialist Monthly*, 6 (May 1937), 13–18; Norman Thomas, "At the Front," *Socialist Call*, 3 (3 April 1937), 12; Abern to Hansen, 14 May 1937, Folder WP: May 1937, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1937. Years later Cannon would comment, in *History of American Trotskyism*, 248–249: "The pressure of those self-satisfied, bourgeois-minded Social Democrats from Milwaukee, and from those fledgling labor fakirs in New York ... was stronger than Norman Thomas's word of honor. He broke his word, double-crossed us. He rose up in the convention, and he himself made the motion to prohibit all internal organs in the party. To prohibit all of them merely meant to prohibit the *Socialist Appeal*; there were no others of any consequence or respect in the organization." For a suggestion of Cannon's resentment at exclusion of Trotskyists from the National Action Committee see Carter to Cannon, 14 April 1937, Box 4/Folders 2–4, Reel 4, JPC Papers. Shachtman provided a more candid, less boosterist, assessment of the Convention in a private communication. See Shachtman to Bill, 9 April 1937, Folder WP: April 1937, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1937. Cannon remained active in the Socialist Party's California work in this period, and was a featured speaker at the Los Angeles May Day meeting at Walker's Hall. See Advertisement, "International May Day Meeting," *Labor Action*, 17 April 1937.

284 Cannon to Carter, 30 April 1937, Reel 4, JPC Papers.

analogous formations in Europe. The task of revolutionists, Trotsky lectured, was not to pander to empty revolutionary phraseology or succumb to Shachtman's diplomacy. Rather, the political imperative was to "unmask the negative advantage of Norman Thomas and Co.," exposing how the Socialist Party's failure to take revolutionary positions on developments like the Moscow Trials and the Spanish Civil War, or accepting the Wisconsin delegation's pandering to the Popular Front, were preparing the Party for an unwholesome unity with the Stalinists. Trotsky saw clearly the writing on the Socialist Party convention's wall: the social democratic body was weak; its composition was generally poor and politically compromised beyond redemption; and the centrists were moving forcefully and unambiguously into stances both conservative and resistant to the revolutionary forces within the Party. "It is impossible to lull one's self with the illusion of 'conquering the party'," Trotsky warned, stressing that at this juncture "passive adaptation" to social democracy's ongoing degeneration threatened "inner crises and damage for the Fourth International." Trotsky thus concluded that it was imperative to recognize that the entryist project had to stiffen its tone and collapse its time frame, adopting clearly "a short and not a long perspective," abandoning mild criticisms and, instead present a "vigorous and implacable attack against the Wisconsin flunkies" who staked their all at the convention on an unabashed anti-Trotskyism.²⁸⁵

Cannon would subsequently agree, writing to New York comrades on 10 June 1937 that he was astounded at the false, potentially deadly, cup of conciliation being offered up to Altman, Baron, and Company, whom he castigated as little more than agents of the degenerated Third International. Shachtman's *Socialist Monthly* article he labeled a "horrible disappointment," a travesty that made his blood "boil." Cannon insisted that the entrenched anti-Trotskyist opposition inside the SP leadership was not merely a "bureaucratic" layer of "right wing socialists." It was an aggressive political enemy, one that understood the ramifications of international developments like the Spanish Civil War and was content to "temporize ... until the workers are all massacred and the 'trouble' is over." "Scoundrel-comrades" like these grasped the situation inside the Socialist Party perfectly clearly, and were preparing a split not as "mere meanness on their part," but out of the "logic of their political position." Fuming at the seeming "hide and seek" maneuverings of the New York "Club" with such Socialist Party political opponents, Cannon called on his counterparts in the Trotsky-

285 Trotsky to Cannon and Shachtman, 25 May 1937, in Naomi Allen and George Breitman, eds., *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936-1937]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1978), 306-307.

ist leadership to start explaining “things this way to the party comrades – and without delay – to show” what was likely to happen in the near future.²⁸⁶

All in the entryist Club were thus aware of the acrimonious situation within the Party after the SP convention. Yet Cannon’s insistence on a basic reorientation was not immediately accepted. Joe Carter issued a 24 May 1937 circular to comrades declaring, “The Left Wing, naturally, has nothing to gain from precipitating factional conflict.” Cannon had an entirely different take, arguing that “compromise with the centrists in any way” was a deadly mistake, and international issues like Spain, on which resolutions at the Socialist Party convention were “scandalous,” demanded unambiguous revolutionary response in the form of a coordinated campaign of resistance. He called on Carter at the New York center to propagandize more forcefully and openly against how the SP convention’s resolution on Spain actually “violates the principled line laid down in the convention resolution on the People’s Front.” This orientation was not necessarily to advance the Socialist Party on any revolutionary road, but to expose its contradictory vacillation in preparation for an inevitable split. “Even here in California,” Cannon wrote, “there is to be noted a pronounced sentiment of the younger comrades to regard the struggle for the revolutionization of the SP as hopeless and to bring things to a break in the near future. We have to pay close attention to these moods, which are no doubt even more pronounced in other sectors.”

Written one day after Trotsky’s letter attacking Shachtman’s SP convention report was penned in Mexico, it is unlikely Cannon’s push against Carter for a more resolute stand had been influenced by this forceful interventionist jolt. It was simply a case of Cannon and Trotsky being on the same political wavelength. In any case, Trotsky’s unambiguous cautionary polemic only confirmed Cannon’s growing unease at the Socialist Party’s unification of centrist and rightist antagonism to the Trotskyist entryists, evident for some time, and it strongly reinforced his long-standing resistance to muddling about in futile political dialogue and frustrating maneuvering with ostensible left centrists of the Zam-Tyler Clarityite stripe. Thomas’s actions at the Socialist Party convention, as well as those of all manner of former “Militants,” convinced Cannon that nothing was to be gained in any more wheelings and dealings with tops of any kind in the Socialist Party. Entryism’s days were numbered both because revolutionaries were driven to oppose centrist vacillation, and because an increasingly bellicose right wing, buttressed by Stalinist popular

286 Cannon to Comrades, 10 June 1937, from Trotsky Papers, Harvard University, Reel 4, JPC Papers.

frontist sensibilities, could no longer countenance a genuine left-wing presence inside the SP. What remained for the revolutionary entryists was to consolidate the gains registered among the truly militant elements and youth of the SP. Trotsky's assault on Shachtman's attempt to put a public face of positive appreciation on the convention proceedings steeled Cannon's resolve to think in terms of weeks rather than months with respect to the time available for the experiment of entry. "We must break out of this vicious cycle at all costs," Cannon concluded, "and in the near future too. It is not worthwhile for us to belong to the Socialist Party if we are going to be muzzled while such tremendous world events are unfolding."²⁸⁷

Knowing that the entryist days of the Trotskyists in the Socialist Party were numbered, Cannon settled in to California, trying to tie up the loose ends of *Labor Action*, keeping abreast of the struggles in the labor movement, where all talk now turned on the insurgent industrial unionism of the CIO.²⁸⁸ Rank-and-file communication with Cannon suggested that the Trotskyist fraction in the Maritime Federation was flagging, its downward trajectory undeniably related to the challenges faced by *Labor Action* which, in spite of all difficulties, still retained a readership of over 200 on the west coast waterfront.²⁸⁹ Reduced to a semi-monthly, the agitational paper struggled to survive into April – May 1937. Its coverage of the March Socialist Convention accented the repudiation of those disrupters who would have drawn the SP into the Stalinist Popular Front. It also ran articles on Trotsky's testimony relating to the Moscow Trials and other issues, as well as an interview with Trotsky on the events in Spain, where fascism was being confronted directly and militarily by working-class insurgents. None of this enamored the paper to the California Clarityites, who carried on "an open boycott of *Labor Action* and refuse any support to it for the

²⁸⁷ The above paragraphs draw on Carter to Comrades, 24 May 1937; Cannon to Carter, 26 May 1937; Abern to Glotzer, 28 May 1937, Folder WP: May 1937, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1937. Burnham would later suggest that Cannon was both following Trotsky's lead and overreacting because Cannon had believed in Thomas's commitments and, according to Burnham, nurtured a "utopian" belief in "influencing Thomas" that was then shattered at the SP convention, where Thomas betrayed the Trotskyists. See Burnham to Cannon, 15 June 1937, Reel 4, JPC Papers. For Cannon's brief subsequent summary of entryist errors on the part of the leadership see Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 238–239.

²⁸⁸ See Trimble to Cannon, 10 May 1937; Cannon to Dear ----, 25 May 1937; Trimble to Jim and Rose, 26 May 1937; Cannon to Carter, 26 May 1937; Trimble to Tyler and Trager, 17 May 1937, "General Organizational and Secretarial Correspondence, 1923–1956," Boxes 15–16, Reels 20–21, JPC Papers.

²⁸⁹ Flo to Jim, 7 May 1937, Reel 4, JPC Papers. This letter, detailing denouement, concluded, "Frankly, I feel it is up to you. I can think of no one else who can handle the situation ... stay until you are well."

frankly stated reason that they don't agree with its policies." This only reminded Cannon of the failures of leading entryist comrades in New York to recognize the central importance of the revolutionary press: "The possibility of the suppression of the *Appeal* should have been anticipated and *Labor Action* should have been conceived as an auxiliary and possible substitute, even if not a completely satisfactory one. The suppression of the *Appeal* should have been the signal for an energetic national campaign to stabilize the support of *LA* and insure its widest possible distribution. Unfortunately, this was not done or more exactly, the direct opposite was done, and we have suffered seriously as a result. ... I count this as a crime against the revolutionary movement."²⁹⁰

Cannon, having never taken up the vacation that brought him to California in 1936, was now seemingly ready for rest. Again, it was not to be. With no press within the Socialist Party, the "Club" was reduced to issuing ostensibly personal letters, signed by one comrade and written to another, that were then mass circulated in mimeographed form to the Trotskyist faction inside the SP. Cannon later claimed that "the Club's" members were the best informed group in the Party: "We had no press. They had the whole machinery of the party. They had the national secretary, the editor, the labor secretary, the organizers – they had the whole works – but we had a program and a mimeograph machine and that proved to be enough." But it was still an uphill struggle to keep the revolutionary entryists on track. Cannon stressed that it was "highly essential in this crucial period to stimulate a lively political and educational discussion in the ranks of our tendency and to make sure that this discussion does not take on a too one-sided immediately practical character." In this light, Cannon warned Carter of adapting too compliantly to Socialist Party sensibilities, transcending the tendency, evident in the recent *Appeal* Conference, to make resolutions "non-mandatory." A case in point, Cannon stressed, was the *Appeal* Conference's proposal for the Socialist Party to withdraw from the Second International. This negative position was not enough, with Cannon underlining the need for "our group to take a clear position in favor of the building of a new (Fourth) International."²⁹¹ This kind of constant intervention, albeit of an *ad hoc* nature, may have been enough for a while, but not for long.

290 Leon Trotsky, "Spanish Victory Will End Fascism States Trotsky," and "Resolutions Go Left: Convention Repudiates Disrupters," *Labor Action*, 17 April 1937; Glen Trimble to James P. Cannon and Steve Roberts, 17 May 1937; Carter to Cannon, 19 May 1937, Box 4/Folders 2–4, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Cannon to Carter, 26 May 1937, Folder WP: May 1937, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1937.

291 Usick to Rose, 20 April 1937; Usick to Rose, 12 May 1937, Box 4/Folders 2–4, Reel 4, JPC

18 Reaction from Above

Debate raged in the Socialist Party over contentious issues. How were the revolutionary forces in Spain to be supported? Should Norman Thomas withdraw his candidacy in the 1937 New York mayoralty contest, supporting Fiorello LaGuardia, then backed by the American Labor Party? As labor militancy crested in a wave of CIO-led conflicts, practical concerns and policy positions relating to the trade unions demanded discussion. Trotskyist mimeographed letters flew across the country. Branch meetings were thrown into turmoil, clashing perspectives manifesting themselves in a seemingly endless war of resolutions.

The SP bureaucracy responded with a "Gag Law," a "Resolution on No More Resolutions," that signaled how far the entrenched leadership would go to stifle democratic discussion and debate over questions of fundamental political principle and strategy. With Trotskyists relocated from New York to Michigan (Harold Robins and George Clarke), Chicago (Swabeck), Pennsylvania, Ohio, New Jersey and elsewhere targeted for further colonizations, and Dunne running for the Mayor of Minneapolis on the Socialist ticket, the entryist dissidents were an increasing and vocal presence across the country. But they were also struggling against a stranglehold of malaise among the New York leadership, which could not decide on whether to support *Labor Action*, a paper that Burnham, for one, now designated "centrist," "secondary," and too regionally-based to contribute decisively to the needs of the entryist experiment. Cannon, long tired of the New York run-around, refrained from overt retaliations. But he complained in correspondence of being fed-up with central comrades who did "nothing but delay and sabotage the work and engage in scholastic discussions." Cannon took particular umbrage at the carping questioning of *Labor Action*, and whether it had "value to us or not, comparing it, a paper which **exists** and has a definite circle of readers and is under our direction even if with certain restrictions, with an 'ideal' paper, free from all restrictions, which **does not exist**." In response, Cannon simply continued "plugging away at work in the west coast maritime sector" and drumming up support for the Trotsky Defense Committee.²⁹²

Papers; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 249–250; Cannon and Glen Trimble to Joe [Carter], May 1937, Box 49, Folder 7, "Cannon Correspondence, Houghton Library," GB Papers.

292 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 250; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 132; Max Shachtman, "The Politics of Gus Tyler – A Genuine Sense of Rotten Liberalism in the Party," and Albert Goldman, "Left Wing Will Not Allow Itself to be Gagged by the Party Bureaucracy!" *Socialist Appeal*, 1/3 (28 August 1937), 6–7, 10–11; Dunne to Cannon, 23 April 1937; Cannon to Carter, 30 April 1937; Carter to Cannon, 8 May 1937; Carter to Cannon, 30 April, 1937; Usick

The California Clarityites, whom Cannon characterized as “real Mensheviks blown in the bottle,” could sense that their time for retribution was near. Cannon wrote to Carter that the west coast left-centrists were “licking their chops over the suppression of the *Appeal*, [and] decided to make a sweep and make an end of *Labor Action* too.” This made it all the more imperative for New York to step up and support the paper of the Pacific coast. Trimble and Cannon besieged Joe Carter with a west coast correspondence on the matter, one letter declaring

I am sick and tired of ‘sticking it out’, (getting myself in a worse physical condition than when I came here) in an effort to finish the job we started – getting *Labor Action* on a firm basis – and not only get no support from the center, but have stumbling blocks put in our path all the time. This has been going on for a year now. EITHER you are for *Labor Action* and get behind it fully. ... OR you are against the paper, and **pass a motion to suspend it.** ... Make a **definite** decision.²⁹³

By late May, it seemed that the entryist project had moved as far as it was going to travel. Differences separated the leading comrades of the “Club,” as to how much could be consolidated further, and over what time period. As May gave way to June, it was apparent that any decision on what to do *in* the Socialist Party was about to be determined, not by a divided Trotskyist entryist “Club,” but by the leadership coalition of the mainstream Socialist Party.

Letters to Cannon, from both coasts, expressed concern at what seemed to some a situation pregnant with danger. Usick wrote to Jim in mid-May 1937, “The risk of a sudden crisis is far too great in the present situation for us to be lulled with the formula, ‘let us experiment and see.’” Tom Kerry warned that “the centrists are nourishing the illusion that the left wing was routed at the convention. I feel that there will be provocative attempts to ‘keep us in our places.’” He called for a tightening up “in preparation for a vigorous **offensive** against the forthcoming repression.” Cannon, too, anticipated such a turn, noting that in all manner of ways the Left-wing was being silenced inside the Socialist Party. This

to Jim, 5 May 1937; Cannon to Carter, 10 May 1937; Usick to Rose, 12 May 1937; Cannon to Carter, 19 May 1937; Usick to Rose, 21 May 1937; Burnham to Cannon, 22 May 1937, Box 4/Folders 2–5, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Cannon to [unnamed Minneapolis comrade], 25 May 1937; Cannon to Joe Carter, 26 May 1937, Box 49, Folder 7, GB Papers; Lovell in Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 132.

293 Cannon to Carter, 30 April 1937; Hansen and Weiss to Cannon, 22 May 1937; Trimble to Jim and Rose, 25 May 1937; Cannon and Trimble to Carter, no date [May 1937]; Trimble to Carter, 19 May 1937, Box 4/Folders 3–5, Reel 4, JPC Papers.

hard reality demanded forthright discussion and political backbone, as well as revolutionary flexibility, Cannon commenting:

Where one device fails we can promptly resort to another, as revolutionists always do under conditions of semi illegality. It should be clear that as long as we are under ... restrictions, we cannot put all our eggs in one basket. ...

We must proceed to the solution of the press difficulty along the line of possibilities under the given conditions. Our aim, however, must be constantly in the direction of the maximum of independence and freedom of expression. The possibilities of utilizing the official press are inconsequential in my opinion. I am in favor of course of utilizing these possibilities to the limit. But it should be done in a revolutionary and not in an adaptationist manner. The contribution of routine, innocuous journalistic matter is not our function. We should test the *Call* and the *Monthly* by submitting articles which put political issues sharply. When they are rejected, we should print them in *Labor Action*. We must especially resist the attempt to narrow down the range of our expression in discussion articles submitted to the monthly *American Socialist Monthly* and to give them a difference and content than we employed in the *Appeal*.

Adding a concrete example to bolster his more abstract claims, Cannon pointed negatively to, "The convention discussion article of Shachtman's in the last issue of the monthly," noting that it was "particularly disappointing in this respect."

Cannon was thus laying the groundwork for confronting what looked to be an organizational rupture, in which the Trotskyists would be expelled from the Socialist Party. "We must begin to prepare our ranks for possible eventualities," he concluded, stressing that, "We should open up a careful but deliberate and aggressive [campaign] against **organizational** fetishism, and inculcate in all our supporters that allegiance to **principles** is the real mark of the revolutionists." Insisting that the Left-wing must not under any circumstances be silenced, Cannon pressed his comrades to "demand and assert the right to express ourselves in mediums of our own choosing." If a split was to take place it might well either require the pages of the faltering *Labor Action* or the defunct *Socialist Appeal* to defend the revolutionary movement from those who would banish it to the sidelines.²⁹⁴

294 The above paragraphs draw on a number of sources. See Cannon to Carter, 13 May 1937;

Trotsky had similar thoughts. He defended Cannon's views on the necessity of preparedness with a 15 June 1937 letter that left no doubts that a split in the Socialist Party was imminent. In the "Old Man's" judgement American Trotskyists should ready themselves for a radical turn that would commence with the publication of an inner-party factional weekly, escalate with an August – September campaign against the right-wing and its conciliatory centrists, and culminate in October – November 1937 with a reorganization leading to the establishment of an independent party. Abern seemed on side. He wrote to Ruth Ageloff in Mexico that he alone, a reluctant entryist who nonetheless adhered to party discipline, had always favored a short-term perspective and was in agreement with Trotsky that the immediate task was to **"prepare the new party."** But he distinguished himself from Cannon and Shachtman, whose position shifted from the "unrealistic" aim of "capturing" or "reforming" the SP to the recognition that circumstances now "dictate otherwise." Burnham, well aware that right-wing factional elements inside the Socialist Party had declared war on the revolutionary entryists, cautioned that there was no need for "panic," and that it was "not necessary ... to speculate about the outcome in terms of who will win the Party apparatus. Our job is to consolidate the maximum number of the left wing in the Party around the revolutionary program; if we succeed in that, our task is correctly done, however we stand thereafter in relation to the Party."²⁹⁵

Trimble to Cannon, 17 May 1937; Tom Kerry to Comrades, 24 April 1937; Usick to Jim, 13 May 1937; Cannon to Carter, 26 May 1937, Box 4, Folders 2–5/Reel 4, JPC Papers. Evidence of the escalating and intensifying assault on Trotskyists inside the Socialist Party mounted in June 1937. See, for instance, James Burnham, "The Special Session of the NEC," 24 June 1937; National Action Committee, Socialist Appeal Association, "The Crisis in the Socialist Party: Forward on a Revolutionary Course or Backward to Defeatist Impotence? Forward to Unity and Growth or Backward to a Split and Decay?" no date; Maurice Spector to Dear Comrade, 7 June 1937; Burnham to Dear Comrade, 7 June 1937; Alex Retzkin to Frank, 9 June 1937; Burnham to Glotzer, 12 June 1937; Burnham, "The Politics of Jack Altman," 17 June 1937; Abern, Burnham, Carter, Draper et al., "Statement to the National Executive Committee," 10 [?] June 1937, all in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 10, Files 4 & 6 & Box 2, File 6, Folder WP: June 1937, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1937.

- ²⁹⁵ Trotsky [Wolfe] to Comrades [Burnham, Cannon, Glotzer, and Weber], 15 June 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 334–335; Abern to Ruth Angeloff, 11 June 1937; Burnham to Glotzer, in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 2, File 6, Folder WP: June 1937, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1937. See also Glotzer, *Trotsky: Memoir & Critique*, 258; Max Shachtman, "Introduction," *Socialist Appeal: An Organ of Revolutionary Socialism* (New York: Greenwood Reprint Corporation, 1968), which stated, somewhat cavalierly, "Trotsky, then in Mexico, began pressing his followers for a sharper factional line that would lead to a split and the re-constitution of an independent Trotskyist organization." Such a directive, according to Shachtman, was "as good as law" for the United States Trotskyists,

The entryists' last stand thus took the form of a coordinated effort to extend the revolutionary tendency within the Socialist Party, orchestrated through the Appeal Institute and buttressed by a publication campaign undertaken by Pioneer Publishers, long-time vehicle of Trotsky's followers in America. Campaigns that were not narrowly factional, but that aimed at involving the entire left-wing membership were promoted. *Labor Action* was given some belated support, which proved too little too late. By June 1937 it was clear that Altman and the right were declaring war on the left, and that Zam, Tyler, and the Clarityites, to whom figures like Burnham still granted far too much leeway and support, were the thinnest of reeds on which to balance Trotskyism's survival within the Socialist Party. Even Burnham was forced to concede to Cannon, as Spain became a point of acute division, "Is it time to set ourselves definitely toward the split? It seems a shame, what with the advantages there would be from taking over this party? But it begins to look as if we were not going to have much choice." The entryists were now caught in the difficult place Cannon and Trotsky had anticipated: with Altman determined to follow a course of war/expulsion, the Clarityites begging for diplomacy, the price paid in the suppression of the Trotskyist critique of popular frontism in Spain, something the SP Trotskyists could not in all political conscience countenance. But with Cannon yet again urged to return to New York, there were those preparing the ground for concessions, with Shachtman's ally and regular Cannon correspondent, Joseph Carter, suggesting that some kind of agreement with the Clarityites might yield time and "the chance of mobilizing the national office of the party, the *Call*, the *ASM*, etc., against Altman." Much apparently depended on Norman Thomas. The SP leader was about to return from a European trip, and he gave

"even though a group of them was of a different mind." See as well "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 295–298, stressing Trotsky's abrupt change of course and Cannon jumping on the bandwagon, "advocating a quick, early split." Shachtman neglects to acknowledge that he was indeed one of those of a different mind, and he reversed course with dispatch. Burnham, however, challenged Trotsky's orientation explicitly in a 22 June 1937 letter. He suggested that the intensity and tempo of the entryist response to the situation inside the SP could not be placed on a calendar. Trotsky offered a rejoinder, stressing that he felt it necessary to "support Cannon's initiative," and that the coming campaign inside the SP "can be successful only on the condition that it is prepared and conducted by the guiding body in a centralized manner, with assured discipline and cohesion." Trotsky concluded to Burnham that, "It is an elementary rule of the game that we must throw responsibility for our emergency measures squarely on the bureaucrats and their state of siege in the Party. ... But the decisive steps must be taken in the next months, even at the risk that some sympathizers will remain in the SP. The best of them will come to us later." Trotsky [Wolfe] to Burnham, 25 June 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 351–352.

little indication of embracing anything approximating the Trotskyist position on international developments.²⁹⁶

Cannon, predictably, took umbrage at the vacillation. Concessions galore had already been made, and it was time to confront the new reality and effect a fundamental reorientation: "It is not worthwhile to remain in the Socialist Party even under present conditions ... no press, to say nothing of further restrictions." What was needed was a "smashing manifesto on the Party situation," to be distributed widely. This should be coordinated with preparations for the inevitable expulsions, which would include a resolute answer to the Party hierarchy on behalf of those banished. Support could be organized throughout the country for the expelled comrades, and the development of a mass caucus of the left-wing in New York launched on a bold, intransigent basis. "We must show that the **split policy** is not mere meanness," Cannon argued, insisting that "only an immediate reorientation can save us from demoralization." To facilitate this immediate entryist readjustment, Cannon called for the restoration of the Bolshevik press (the *Socialist Appeal*) and an intensification of the struggle for the politics of revolution and its principled positions.²⁹⁷

Burnham was incensed, regarding Cannon's "rather hysterical" response as little more than "an attempt to cover your own tracks." He called for an end to Cannon's ostensible bombast, was in favor of a vigorous and direct fight against Altman and the right-wing, emphasizing revolutionary positions, rejecting truce pressures, but struggling, not to divorce Trotskyists from the Clarityite left centrists so much as to unite with them. Winning over the Clarity group, especially on issues such as Spain and the Fourth International, was Burnham's priority. Agreeing with Cannon that a press to defend the expelled was absolutely necessary, Burnham clung to his own proposal that Pioneer Publishers "begin the publication of a paper," rather than reviving the *Socialist Appeal* or even turning to *Labor Action*. Burnham's perspective was, unlike that of Cannon, stalled in an otherworldly denial of the imminent danger posed to the Trotskyist entryists by their opponents in the Socialist Party leadership. He offered a number of reasons as to why a "manifesto on the party situation" could and should be delayed but, most importantly, he still cultivated illusions that "the conclusion of the fight will see us losing the party framework Our

296 George Novack to Cannon, 21 May 1937; Joseph Carter to Comrades, 24 May 1937; Carter to Cannon, 26 May 1937; Burnham to Cannon, 5 June 1937; Carter to Cannon, 8 June 1937, Box 4/Folders 3–5, Reel 4, JPC Papers.

297 Cannon to Carter, no date [8–9 June 1937?]; Cannon to Comrades, 10 June 1937, Box 4, Folders 3–5, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Cannon to Carter, 9 June 1937, Box 49, Folder 7, "Cannon Correspondence, Houghton Library," GB Papers.

job was and remains to rally the maximum number of the active militants in the party around the revolutionary program. The probability is large that this means leaving the party behind. But, while making no concession to legalism, we must leave a road open for taking over the Party. We have nothing to lose by this; and a possibility (even though a small one) for great gain.”²⁹⁸

Burnham's response to Cannon was written 15 June 1937. One day later Joseph Carter wrote to Cannon letting him know that the Altman Caucus had convened in New York, 400 strong, with an array of Party spokesmen lining up in favor of the expulsion of the Trotskyists. A petition to this effect was forwarded to the National Executive Committee, and with Thomas now back in New York, word was that he too was inclined to give the Left-wing the heave-ho. From this, things moved relatively quickly, and on 19 June 1937 the Socialist Party's NEC met in New York, where it heard in open session from Burnham, Spector, and Carter, before going into closed executive discussions where no Trotskyist spokespersons were present. The Clarityites, always fair-weather friends to the more intransigent leftists in the SP now rallied against the Trotskyists. They publicly separated themselves from the campaigns around the Moscow Trials, attacks on Stalinist popular front outrages in Spain, and the sectarianism of the WP entryists, one expression of which, Zam, Tyler, and Co., now agreed, was refusal to endorse LaGuardia's American Labor Party-backed run for the New York mayoralty. In Chicago, Swabeck, Selander, and George Clarke stood firm on a basic position of “no concessions.” On the west coast Shachtman, his political wrists well slapped by Trotsky, distanced from the influences of what remained of the New York “Club,” and whose better political side tended to rise to the occasion when he was in closest contact and direct alliance with his oldest co-worker, met with Cannon and Trimble and hammered out a militant consensus. It centered on the belief that the Socialist Party was headed straight for an irrevocable split. When expulsions of the Trotskyists did occur, Cannon, Shachtman, and Trimble argued that those turfed out of the SP should be vigorously defended. The Trotskyist-controlled East Side New York branch could issue a weekly *Socialist Appeal*, serving as a “savage, relentless, irrecon-

298 Burnham to Cannon, 15 June 1937, Box 4, Folders 3–5, Reel 4, JPC Papers. Correspondence involving Burnham, Glotzer, and Abern distanced such figures from Cannon, with Glotzer nonetheless supporting Cannon, Swabeck, Cochran, and Selander in seeing the potential for *Labor Action* to serve as a forum to address Norman Thomas's writings in the *Call* as well as taking on the Clarityites. Abern described this as an ill-advised “head on collision policy” with the SP's right and centrist forces. See Glotzer to Burnham, 21 June 1937; Abern to Glotzer, 22 June 1937, in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 2, Files 6 & 4, Folder WP: June 1937, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1937.

cilable" voice of opposition to the actions of all wings of Socialist leadership, Altman-Porter, Zam-Tyler, and Thomas. This fight to refuse the expulsions must then be extended throughout the country. When the National Action Committee of the Appeal Institute met in New York on 24–25 June 1937, espousing a "left unity opposition to LaGuardia," and vowing to revive the banned *Socialist Appeal*, the inevitability of mass expulsions and an ultimate split in the SP were assured.²⁹⁹

19 The End of Entry

The NEC of the Socialist Party decided not to act precipitously. It resisted Altman's ultimatum that Trotskyists be expelled forthwith. Instead, it tried, in effect, to outlaw all factional activity, demanding the suspension of "organized attempts to apply pressure for changes of policy and of the initiation of new policy."³⁰⁰ "Altman-Thomas-Zam and Co should simply be told to go to hell," wrote Cannon, Shachtman, and Trimble, noting that "the inevitability of a split" necessarily subordinated all tactics to this destined outcome. Especially to be guarded against was succumbing to an inclination to make concessions with the purpose of avoiding friction. "More than ever before," insisted Can-

299 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 250–251; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 138–139; Max Shachtman, "Against LaGuardia Socialism," *Socialist Monthly Review*, 6 (September 1937), 21–22; Gus Tyler, "Socialist Discipline and Action!" *Socialist Monthly Review*, 6 (September 1937), 23–25; Venkataramani, "Leon Trotsky's Adventure in American Radical Politics, 1935–1937," 29–32; Carter to Cannon, 16 June 1937; Carter to Cannon, 21 June 1937; Carter to Cannon, 22 June 1937; Swabeck to Cannon, 23 June 1937; Cannon, Shachtman, and Trimble to Comrades, 29 June 1937, Box 4/Folders 3–5, Reel 4, JPC Papers. Shachtman, dressed down by Trotsky over his unduly positive account of the Socialist Party Convention and his New York "Club" views, was seemingly converted to an understanding that the Norman Thomas-led Party was without redeeming features. Trotsky to Cannon and Shachtman, 25 May 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 306–307. Shachtman wrote, rather sycophantically, to Trotsky in an attempt to allay concern over "us American conciliators," noting that he was now working closely with Cannon. See Shachtman to Trotsky, 29 June 1937, Roll 3, Reel 3346, MS Papers. Glotzer-Burnham correspondence revealed that "discussions in the south, although not with L.D., ... believed Cannon's line in the S.P. to have been correct and the only revolutionary course against the conduct of the Center." Glotzer to Burnham, 21 June 1937, "General Organizational and Secretarial Correspondence, 1923–1956," Boxes 15–16/Reels 20–21, JPC Papers.

300 "NEC Decisions Direct Party to Mass Activity," *Socialist Call*, 3 (3 July 1937), 5; "NEC Decisions Direct Party to Mass Activity," *Socialist Call*, 3 (10 July 1937), 2, quoted in Venkataramani, "Leon Trotsky's Adventure in American Radical Politics, 1935–1937," 33.

non, Shachtman, and Trimble, “we must ... work on our own, ... not allowing the demoralization of the work by the interference of Stalinists and semi-Stalinists.”³⁰¹

As Trotskyist-sympathetic elements of the YPSL took aim at the Socialist Party’s directives to cease all factional activity and in actuality avoid political discussions, Trimble issued a fiery statement addressed to “All Revolutionary Socialists,” calling for a concerted struggle against those who would wreck the Party, among them Norman Thomas, the Altman-Porter wing of former Militants, and the Zam-Tyler-led Clarityites. By the time that the first new New York number of the *Socialist Appeal* hit the streets in mid-August 1937, Thomas and Altman had worked out a cautious plan of expulsion, premised on bringing individuals such as James Burnham and a seemingly resuscitated Maurice Spector up on disciplinary charges. Burnham and Spector were suspended for one year by the Altman-controlled New York City Central Committee of the Socialist Party, with two rank-and-file revolutionaries expelled outright. Although the Altmanites ran into some procedural, constitutional difficulties, their disciplinary offensive of July and August 1937, coinciding with what Gus Tyler and the Clarityites regarded as the liquidation of the Socialist Party into the ALP and LaGuardiaism, complicated the factional situation immensely. Thomas and Altman came together around the necessity of expulsions, solidifying centrist opposition to the Trotskyists’ insistence on publishing their own, increasingly uncompromising, factional organ. When the Appeal Association held a late July 1937 “Plenum” in New York, endorsing Cannon’s and Shachtman’s understandings of how to proceed, Altman seized the opportunity to summon a meeting of the City Central Committee to expel over fifty Trotskyists for their disloyalty in attending what was labeled an anti-SP conference, holding in abeyance further charges against roughly 70 dissidents. All of this was applauded by the Communist Party’s *Daily Worker*, which called not only for the expulsion of “Shachtman, Burnham, Abern and their tools,” but the purging of the Socialist Party of “all ideas and practices of Trotskyism.”³⁰²

301 Cannon, Shachtman, and Trimble to Comrades, 29 June 1937, Box 4/Folders 3–5, Reel 4, JPC Papers. See also “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 298–300.

302 Spector’s revival was commented on by Burnham and others. The Canadian had relocated from Toronto to New York to play a more active role in unfolding events. He had surrendered his license to practice law in Ontario in 1937, a decision suggesting that he was now committed to living in the United States. I am indebted to Tyler Wentzell for this information, which Wentzell uncovered in Spector’s file in the Archives of the Law Society of Ontario, and alludes to in an unpublished manuscript, “Comrades and Scoundrels: William Krehm, the International Anti-Stalinist Left, and the Spanish Revolution.” On other matters in this paragraph see “Socialist Party is Split in New York Expulsions,” and “Why We

Shachtman later recalled that, "We were in effect given a mock trial, and we were unceremoniously kicked out of the party." He compared the expulsion to that he had experienced at the hands of the Stalinists, eight years earlier: "on grounds just as flimsy and by means just as brusque and bureaucratic." Years later, Shachtman would caution those considering joining the Socialist Party. He insisted with hyperbole that such an "unappetizing ending" should be undertaken only with appreciation that, "If there is one organization in the U.S. outside of the Communist Party which has a thoroughly undemocratic, totalitarian-Fuehrer regime, it is the Thomas organization." It thought little of framing young militants and kicking them out.³⁰³

With the Clarityites quibbling over constitutionalities, in short order the California Socialist Party's charter was revoked.³⁰⁴ Among SP youth, where Trotskyist entryists managed to secure considerable support, Tyler and the Clarityites were hounded by hecklers who wanted to know who proved a greater threat to the Socialist Party, left-wing advocates of Trotsky or right-wing Altmanites. "The Trotskyists," snorted Tyler, and on the eve of a National Convention of the Socialist Party scheduled for late September 1937, American socialists were embroiled in chaos and confusion. The count of expelled branches in New York City alone was said to number "over twenty," and an emergency meeting of the SP NEC convening around Labor Day determined that all of those connected with the *Socialist Appeal* and the Appeal Association were suspended from the Party. They had until 1 October 1937 to petition for reinstatement or face permanent expulsion. Shachtman recounted how the Trotskyists mounted protests, raising "a hue and cry," but the split had been consummated. Trotskyists banished from a number of YPSL branches simply

Are Publishing the Socialist Appeal," *Socialist Appeal*, 14 August 1937; "Stalinists Applaud Ousting of Left-Wing from S.P.," *Socialist Appeal*, 21 August 1937; "YPSL Split in N.Y.; 70 More Ousted by Altman," *Socialist Appeal*, 25 August 1937; Max Shachtman, "The Politics of Gus Tyler: A Genuine Case of Rotten Liberalism in the Party," and James Burnham, "Who is Back of F.H. LaGuardia?" *Socialist Appeal*, 28 August 1937; Abern to Jack [Wilson?], 7 July 1937; George Papcun et al., Committee to Save the Socialist Party, "For Revolutionary Socialist Action," no date, both in Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 2, File 4; Tyler to Trimble, circa 15 July 1937, Folder WP: July 1937, "Report of the Plenum Conference," 30 July 1937; Cannon, "Expulsion Campaign in New York," *Information Bulletin No. 1: To All Group Secretaries*, 4 August 1937; Cannon to Dunne, 26 August 1937; Goldman to Cannon, 29 August 1937; Cannon to Trotsky, 30 August 1937, all in PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1937.

303 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 250–251; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 263–295, esp. 294, 298; Venkataraman, "Leon Trotsky's Adventure in American Radical Politics, 1935–1937," 32–44; Max Shachtman, "25 Years of American Trotskyism, Part 1: The Origins of American Trotskyism," *New Internationalist*, 20 (January – February 1954), 12.

304 Glen Trimble, "NEC Suspends California State Charter," *Socialist Appeal*, 21 August 1937.

declared themselves the actual Young People's Socialist League, since they had the support of the majority of the local body. Cannon reported to an international comrade in September 1937 on the gains registered among the Yipsels which, dominated by a left-wing majority, were forced to split by a "centrist minority in control of the old National Committee."

Addressing the September 1937 YPSL Philadelphia Convention where the split was realized, Cannon placed the accent on the need to construct the revolutionary party through building revolutionary youth, outlining the heritage of an American and international revolutionary past that ran from the Haymarket martyrs to Lenin and Trotsky. He contrasted this legacy with that of the "Altman-Zam Party," which, in a withering critique, he dispensed with as "discouraged, tired, undecided," "LaGuardia Liquidators" who "attract nobody." The Clarityites he saw as destined to become mired in the "miserable life of centrists," "Helpless, Homeless, Hopeless, and Harassed." He urged the youth to join with him in creating a party of democratic centralism, a free party, but not "a play house." Revolutionaries, Cannon claimed, always relied on youth, the backbone of all struggle to "build a new world," and he clearly worked, in his Convention speech, to inspire left-wing youth to join in what he regarded as "The greatest campaign the world has ever known," the struggle for Socialism that alone could "save humanity from the abyss." Cannon predicted that fully 1000 of these militant youth meeting in Philadelphia were supporters of "our tendency," and would remain so in "the post-convention struggle." This represented "from three to four times the total membership of the Spartacus Youth League at the time of entry into the Socialist Party."

Right-wing retribution inside the SP continued. State Socialist Party charters were soon revoked in Indiana, Ohio, and Minnesota, all places where Trotskyist entryists secured influence, recruits, and strongly entrenched control over offices and ideas. From the latter, Vincent Dunne wrote to Cannon in late August 1937, "We are expecting confidently some sort of disruptive move on the part of the Clarityites. The Minnesota charter is in jeopardy unquestionably. If it is to be lifted, no one in Minnesota will turn a hair." The entryist experiment was all over but the shouting.³⁰⁵

305 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 250–251; "Erber Hits Plan to Steal YPSL Convention," *Socialist Appeal*, 21 August 1937; "Erber Greets Youth Convention," *Socialist Appeal*, 4 September 1937; Hal Draper, "Left Wing Carries YPSL Convention," and "YPSL Convention Organizes for Work," *Socialist Appeal*, 11 September 1937; James P. Cannon, "Expulsion Campaign in New York," *Information Bulletin No. 1: To All Group Secretaries*, 4 August 1937; Cannon to Trotsky, 30 August 1937, PRL, Chrono File, January – October 1937; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 137–140; Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 283;

The hubbub, however, was not insignificant. Goldman led a Left-wing chorus of denunciation from Chicago.³⁰⁶ The California Clarityites followed up their state expulsions with an unseemly legal action against Glen Trimble and others. Backed by a decisive majority in a San Francisco SP Local, they refused to knuckle under to their bureaucratic expulsion, expressing the view that they would continue to function as the bona fide representatives of the Socialist Party until the matter had been resolved through appeal to the Party's highest authorities. This was considered a refusal to turn over the local's records and property, prompting allegations of "theft and embezzlement" and a summons to appear before the court. The action was roundly denounced by the Left-wing as the work of "capitalist stool pigeons," the claim made that this was the first time in United States history that officials of a working-class party had preferred criminal charges against socialist opponents, dragging them before a bourgeois judge and threatening them with imprisonment.³⁰⁷

In a National Executive Committee liquidation of the Socialist Party's electoral machinery in the New York mayoralty contest, Norman Thomas withdrew from the race, ceding votes to the American Labor Party-supported Fiorello H. LaGuardia. This completed a "People's Front-style" sweep that saw the Love-stoneite Right Opposition, the Communist Party, the powerful metropolitan labor bureaucracy, and now the Socialist Party fail to run candidates against LaGuardia, who backed a Republican civic slate that included a notorious red-baiting politician, George U. Harvey. With Thomas's withdrawal coming too late to allow any other Socialist Party nomination, the African American Socialist Party left winger, New York organizer Ernest R. McKinney, announced that revolutionary socialists would be unofficially nominating James P. Cannon as their mayoralty candidate. An independent socialist campaign was organized,

Glotzer to Cannon, 17 August 1937; Dunne to Cannon 24 August 1937; Glotzer[?] to Cannon, 29 August 1937; Goldman [?] to Glotzer, 31 August 1937, Box 4/Folders 3–5, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Cannon to Andre, *Librarie du Travail*, 10 September 1937, Box 49, Folder 7, "Cannon Correspondence, Houghton Library," GB Papers. Coverage of all of these developments was extensive in *Socialist Appeal*, 14 August 1937; 21 August 1937; 28 August 1937; 4 September 1937; 11 September 1937. For Cannon's YPSL speech see Typewritten notes. "Speech to YPSL Convention – J.P. Cannon – Philadelphia – September 2, 1937," Box 42, Folder 15, GB Papers, originally read in Breitman Papers folder labeled, "JPC material, December 1934–1937." Cannon and Shachtman worked on the Philadelphia conference of the YPSL together with Ernest Erber and Hal Draper. See Shachtman to Trotsky, 30 August 1937, Roll 3, Reel 3346, MS Papers.

³⁰⁶ See, especially, "Left Wing Will Not Allow Itself to be Gagged by the Party Bureaucracy; Declaration by Albert Goldman for the Left Wing at the Chicago Membership Meeting in a Reply to Maynard Krueger's Threats," *Socialist Appeal*, 28 August 1937.

³⁰⁷ "Clarity Calls the Cops," *Socialist Appeal*, 28 August 1937.

with street meetings, rallies, and literature distribution, culminating in a mobilization to “write-in” Cannon as a working-class alternative to LaGuardia. An Irving Plaza ratification meeting was called for 13 October 1937, advertised under the auspices of the Left-wing of the Socialist Party of New York, with Cannon, Shachtman, Burnham, Spector, and Hal Draper speaking.³⁰⁸

At New York’s City College, left wing Yipsels promoted Cannon as “the only candidate divorced from all capitalist parties who runs on a platform of militant class struggle.” Their satirical skewering of the Communist and Socialist Parties plumping for LaGuardia was expressed in an 18 October 1937 leaflet, “Alice in Wonderland, or Who’s Who in the Elections.”³⁰⁹ These developments and more go a long way toward explaining the bitterness with which Socialist Party stalwarts came to regard Trotskyist entryists. As Shachtman wrote to Trotsky at the end of August 1937, reflecting understatedly on the Trotskyist-Socialist Party encounter, “It seems we have disturbed their peace of mind.”³¹⁰

This state of agitated affairs dragged on for weeks, into October 1937, with the left wing and expelled entryists fighting a rearguard action, challenging the Socialist Party’s entrenched leadership and embarrassing it in a call for a rank-and-file Convention at the end of November in Chicago. That gathering would address how the National Executive Committee of the Socialists “trampled upon the Party constitution and all the principles of Party democracy by ignoring the demands of numberless Party locals for referendums ... to register the will of the Party membership on ... burning questions.” This emergency convention would, according to the *Socialist Appeal*, throw “out the trait-

308 James Burnham, “Who is Back of F.H. LaGuardia? The Capitalist Forces Behind the Candidate of the New York People’s Front,” *Socialist Appeal*, 28 August 1937; “National Executive Committee Sells Out Socialist Party to LaGuardia,” *Socialist Appeal*, 11 September 1937; “Thomas Quits Election Campaign; Left Wing to Act on Campaign this Week,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 October 1937; “Nominate James P. Cannon for Mayor in New York Municipal Campaign: Open Write-In Drive for Only Labor Candidate,” *Socialist Appeal*, 9 October 1937; “Stalinist Hoodlum Beats Up Socialist at New York Election Campaign Meeting,” *Socialist Appeal*, 16 October 1937; Max Shachtman, “Supporting LaGuardia Betrays Socialism,” and James Casey, “LaGuardia’s Record: A Lackey of Capitalism,” *Socialist Appeal*, 11 September 1937; “LaGuardia Endorses George U. Harvey; ‘People’s Front’ Candidate for New York’s Red-Baiter No. 1; Thomas is ‘Shocked’ But Will Not Run,” *Socialist Appeal*, 25 September 1937. “Ratification Meet Starts NY Mayoralty Drive Left Socialists for Cannon,” *Socialist Appeal*, 16 October 1937. For discussion of the LaGuardia campaign and its relation to the Trotskyist SP entry see “Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 291–296.

309 [City College YPSL], “Alice in Wonderland, or Who’s Who in the Elections ... Write in James P. Cannon for Mayor,” 18 October 1937; “New York Election Drive Notes,” *Socialist Appeal*, 30 October 1937.

310 Shachtman to Trotsky, 30 August 1937, Roll 3, Reel 3346, MS Papers.

ors” and reestablish “the Party on the foundation of revolutionary socialism.” Backed by the State Executive Committees of the Socialist Parties of California, Ohio, Minnesota, and Indiana, as well as the City Executive Committee of the Left-wing branches of SP Local New York, the Executive Committee of Cook County (Chicago), and the National Executive Committee of the Young People’s Socialist League, this rallying cry against “betrayal of socialist principle, the usurpation of power, [and the] splitting of the movement” was destined to be overtaken by events. As much as it threw something of a scare into the Thomas-Altman-Zam/Tyler congealment of Socialist Party leadership, the Left-wing gathering would be postponed until 31 December 1937, and its purpose of reclaiming the Party for socialism was ultimately replaced by creating a new, Fourth International-affiliated Trotskyist organization.³¹¹

20 Assessing the French Turn in America

Comment on the French turn in the United States often veers toward vitriol. Daniel Bell captures something of the tone of animosity in his assertions that Trotskyists were “the Pharisees of the revolution,” their progress achieved through “cannibalism,” entry into the SP proceeding “dialectically ... to the task of disintegration.”³¹²

Contrary to later assessments that the Workers Party entryists “sought a split,” and never conducted themselves in the “flexible and less sectarian manner” that would have allowed the Socialist Party to evolve into “the revolutionary movement anticipated by the Trotskyists,” the actualities of Workers Party entry and its eventual resolution in expulsion were somewhat more complicated. Certainly a split was always likely, if not inevitable. Trotsky and Cannon recognized this, even if the timing of the ultimate rupture was not evident to entry’s practitioners. The irony, perhaps, was that those on the other side of the Socialist Party differentiation, such as Norman Thomas, Herbert Zam, and Gus Tyler, may not have realized that a break-up of the social democratic body

311 “Left Wing Issues Convention Call: NY and Chicago Join Four State Committees in National Appeal,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 October 1937; “Kansas City Endorses Chicago Rank and File Convention,” *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937; “On to the Convention: Chicago Mass Meeting to Welcome Delegates,” *Socialist Appeal*, 25 December 1937; “New Party Formed; To Fight War Plans – Conventional Resolutions Stress Fight on War, Mass Work, Defense of Soviet Union by New Party – Left Wing Delegates Found Socialist Workers Party at Convention in Chicago,” *Socialist Appeal*, 8 January 1938.

312 Bell, “The Background and Development of Marxian Socialism in the United States,” 384–387.

was bound to happen sometime, given the collision of revolutionary versus reformist ideas and practices. These practitioners of the 'art of the possible', considered themselves pragmatists who could manage fissiparous elements adroitly, relying, in the last instance, on their capacity to wield arbitrary and bureaucratic authority. It would be these types, including Thomas, but also figures like Altman and Porter, or the Clarityites, who, in their combined response to the challenge of revolutionary entryists, determined the final split, their suppression of discussion and expulsion of opponents making a mockery of a proclaimed "all-inclusive party." Cannon's California course (so threatening to the SP tops because it was actually demonstrating that revolutionary leadership could advance the socialist project), developments in New York, Minnesota, and elsewhere, a close scrutiny of what entryism was about, and a balanced assessment of the actual strengths of the Socialist Party and how its fractured factions responded to Trotskyism's political challenges, reveal complexities not always evident in the usual castigations of ultra-left, sectarian "splitters."³¹³ Trotskyists did not so much "wreck" a Socialist Party as provide a mirror into which its staid leadership looked, only to find its image shattering as a consequence of it being forced to confront left-wing criticisms and take responsibility for its actions in stifling them administratively. A dispassionate assessment of the actual state of the SP before, during, and after the WP entry, as well as a balanced understanding of what the entryists were subjected to, confirms this judgement.

As Cannon later noted, the Socialist Party was on the skids when he and other Trotskyists embarked on entry, especially in certain regions of the country: arriving in California in 1936 he found the SP "a hollow shell." Shachtman, who came to embrace the strongest view among the entryists that the SP could eventually be won over to revolutionary politics, nonetheless espoused a Trotsky-like view on the eve of the WP's move into the Socialists, stating that the Party "had been moribund for years." This was perhaps, in 1934–35, an overstatement, but it proved prophetic in capturing the movement of the SP into a political position of less and less significance. Recognizing this trajectory does not negate the extent to which the Socialist Party, especially in the early-to-mid-1930s, still retained the capacity to attract militant youth and proletarian activists to its ranks, so obvious was the crisis of capitalism in the depths of the Great Depression and so appealing was the patina of socialism associated with Norman Thomas and his followers. This was the dialectic that drove entry: a social

³¹³ This characterization appears in Julius Jacobson, "The Two Deaths of Max Shachtman," *New Politics*, 10 (Winter 1973), 97. It is also a staple of Socialist Party/Norman Thomas histories, evident in Fleishman, *Norman Thomas*, 181; Johnpoll, *Pacifist's Progress*, 179–182.

democratic organization unable to capitalize on the opportunities presented by capitalist crisis precisely because of its refusal to confront the calamities of the profit system with the alternative of revolutionary social transformation, yet still able to draw those experiencing radicalization to its banner, at least for a time. Revolutionary Trotskyists confronted this situation and determined that it demanded intervention: to clarify the situation inside the Socialist Party, and to provide an alternative so that genuine revolutionary elements would not be absorbed by other tendencies, little better than the inevitably fracturing ranks of the SP, such as the Communist Party or its Right Opposition, the Lovestoneites. This situation, to be sure, did not absolutely preclude entryists, such as the Workers Party, winning over the bulk of the SP rank-and-file, and transforming the Party into a revolutionary body, dispersing its right-wing and convincing an inveterate centrist leadership of the errors of its ways or displacing it. This, however, was exceedingly unlikely.

The grating conditions and contemptuous treatment that Cannon and the Trotskyist "Club" endured from the outset of their integration into the Socialist Party suggested limits to such wishful thinking almost immediately. As entry proceeded, Cannon and the WP were schooled in the lessons that the overlapping lock on the SP exercised by right-wingers, centrists, and pseudo-left elements was iron-clad. The rigid boundaries of political containment were increasingly evident as 1936 gave way to 1937. It was Cannon who learned most decisively in this Socialist Party pedagogy of hard and harsh knocks, while Shachtman and Burnham, for instance, clung late in the day to the illusion that they could broker a place for themselves and their politics through relations with elements of the SP's New York leadership placated with diplomacy. It was not to be. But the Trotskyists did not split the Socialist Party so much as they were run out of its town on a rail.

Frank Warren, who recognizes that the Trotskyists were "forced out" of the SP, notes that the Socialists lost 8,000 members between 1934 and 1936, when the Old Guard bolted to form the Social Democratic Federation. As the Trotskyists entered the SP, this hemorrhaging continued, but the process was one of extension rather than anything attributed solely to the Workers Party entryists. By 1937, and the expulsion of the Trotskyists, SP membership plummeted to a low point of barely 6,500, and Peter Drucker details the "downward, rightward spiral" of the Socialists, with affiliated individuals dwindling to 3,000 in mid-1938 and under 2,000 by the end of 1940. At the latter point, badly divided over what position to take on United States involvement in World War II, Norman Thomas and the Socialists could only garner what Ross describes as "a pathetic 117,326" votes. This was down considerably from the 190,000 commanded in 1936, and a mere fraction of the 885,000 votes cast for Thomas as Presiden-

tial candidate earlier in the 1930s. The notion that the Trotskyists engineered a split in the Socialist Party in 1936–37 that then precipitated a social democratic free-fall into oblivion is belied by a historical continuity of intensifying factionalism, differentiation, and political marginalization that plagued Thomas and his American Party from 1934 into the 1940s.³¹⁴

If there were Trotskyists who clung to the belief that the Socialist Party could be reconfigured and made into a revolutionary force, Cannon and Trotsky were not among them. Entry was almost certainly not conceived with this purpose in mind, and if the idea had ever been entertained, much cold water was thrown on it by the actions of the SP big-wigs. The considerable irony of Cannon's insistence that entryists engage in the hard work of building the Socialist Party, conducting themselves as dedicated workers in the mass mobilizations of 1936–37, is that he put forward this view from California, where he actually carried it out to good effect. Yet Cannon's California labors were conducted

314 The above paragraphs draw on James P. Cannon, "Thoughts on Socialism and Black Liberation," 7 July 1974, reprinted in *James P. Cannon: A Political Tribute – Including Five Interviews from the Last Year of His Life* (New York: Pathfinder, 1974), 34; Frank A. Warren, *An Alternative Vision: The Socialist Party in the 1930s* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1974), 4; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 251–305, which addresses the entryist period, commencing with the Trotsky-like assessment; Ross, *Socialist Party of America*, 405; Shannon, *Socialist Party of America*, 223, 247, 255; Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialist's Odyssey Through the "American Century"* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), 95. On the Socialist Party's demise, see also the comments in Michael Goldfield, "On Reuther: Legends and Lessons," *Against the Current*, 67 (March – April 1997), 32. Note, as well, the commentary in "Socialist Party Near Collapse Recent NEC Meet Reveals," *Socialist Appeal*, 5 November 1938. Vote and membership counts vary, but I have generally taken the upper end of tallies in order to reflect maximum strengths. Quoting and paraphrasing Cannon, Shachtman, and others I suggested in an earlier article that commentary – political and historiographic – claiming the Trotskyist entry and exit from the SP disabled the social democratic organization must contend with the extent that the Socialist Party was clearly caught in the "vice-grip of demise" because of a host of other problems it confronted, which became especially evident in the later 1930s. See Bryan D. Palmer, "The French Turn in the United States: James P. Cannon and the Trotskyist Entry into the Socialist Party, 1934–1937," *Labor History*, 59 (No. 5, 2018), esp. 630. This argument, as much in my earlier article and the detail of this chapter should confirm, does not suggest that in spite of this downward trajectory, and the weakness of the SP in particular locales, there were not those, in the mid-1930s, who were drawn to the Party of Norman Thomas, attracted by the possibilities of involvement in an ostensibly socialist political movement. I thus reject the critique of my position in Zumoff, "The Left in the United States and the Decline of the Socialist Party," 169, which I regard as an unnecessary cultivation of the narcissism of small (and strained) differences that pays too little careful attention to chronology and context, the situation of 1934–35 that Zumoff is addressing being rather different than the evolving situation in 1934–37 addressed in my discussion of entry.

knowing full well that a break from and split within the Socialist Party was inevitable. To the extent that Trotskyists precipitated this split, it was already in the making, and the ultimate expulsion of the Workers Party entryists was the responsibility of the SP's left-centrists, centrists, and a reconfigured right wing. These social democratic opponents within the SP were eventually chomping at the exclusionist bit to rid themselves of Cannon and others, whose political inciseness was a thorn in the Socialist side; among different layers of the Norman Thomas-led Party there was recognition of the need to rid the sclerotic, ostensibly revolutionary, body politic of this wounding entry. A Socialist Party constituency deeply antagonistic to Trotskyism and prone to take right-leaning positions on all manner of political issues would thus be joined by centrists and even ostensible left Clarityites, who would go along with expulsion of former Workers Party members in order to achieve peace in the illusory (and obviously flagging) non-sectarian, mass socialist party.

Cannon was following an entryist course entirely in line with Trotsky's earlier, 1929, assessment of the Socialist Party and the possibilities it held for revolutionary activity: the top strata of socialist leadership Trotsky condemned as one-day-a-week revolutionaries who might well succeed in masquerading as communists, but could not even measure up as "intellectual opponents." They were nothing more than "class enemies." The Left Opposition, Trotsky stressed in 1929, must steer its course, not to such "petty-bourgeois Babbits, but to the proletarian Jimmie Higginses ..., to the young worker who desires to understand and to fight, and is capable of enthusiasm and self-sacrifice. These are the people from whom we must attract and educate the genuine cadres of the party and the proletariat." Although this judgement predated Socialist Party entry by more than half a decade, it remained a forceful analytic foundation on which entryism built. Cannon's approach to his work in the Socialist Party followed it intuitively. In New York, however, where Shachtman, Burnham, and others cultivated misconceptions of taking over the Socialist Party and converting it to a revolutionary force, less building up of the SP took place than happened in California. Cannon ironically worked harder for the SP in the short term while holding on to a realistic long-term appraisal of the limitations of the organization. This New York practice cultivated a layer of established SP leaders of the kind Trotsky had long ago dismissed as imbued with dilettantism, conservatism, and complacent self-satisfaction, human material destined to be "incapable of sacrifice in the name of a great idea" such as revolutionary socialism.

Shachtman did manage, however, to mesmerize significant numbers of left-socialist metropolitan youth, especially in New York. Julius Jacobson, Irving Howe, and others remembered Shachtman's kibitzing humor and his youth-

ful physicality, as well as his incisive intellect and erudition. "A young man's person," Shachtman was "fun to be with; you could make jokes with him; he was bawdy; he'd hug you; he'd pinch your cheek." And those who heard Max speak at well-attended public forums, in Webster Hall or Irving Plaza, were unlikely to forget the experience. "We were always there," remembered Jacobson, "entertained by his razor-sharp wit, his polemical skills, his sense of irony ... but primarily because we were clearly in the presence of an exceptional political intelligence." Hal Draper, National Secretary of the YPSL and fresh from memorable and large public campus debates with his then-Stalinist brother, Theodore, was but one of the most able of a legion of young militants recruited to Trotskyism in the Workers Party entry. That such leftists would remember Shachtman's influence, rather than engage with Cannon's actual history, more obscure and less likely to be part of the historical memory of intimate relations in New York, is not surprising.³¹⁵

Even acknowledging that, as Trotsky and Cannon knew well, the entryists would have to break with the Socialist Party, none of this meant that entry was destined to be a sectarian endeavor, one in which a split was rigidly sought. Entry could well proceed as political work done assiduously with a transparent airing of strategic differences. In this case, it was always more likely that Socialist Party elements would band together and force the Trotskyists out. This was what happened. Questioned by Sidney Lens in 1974, Cannon remarked on his California entry successes, that, "The right-wingers remaining in the Socialist Party got alarmed about" Trotskyists securing a majority on the state Executive and setting up *Labor Action*, "and began expelling our people." Asked if he

315 Internal Workers Party Club correspondence, cited above, provides evidence of some leading Trotskyists in New York investing illusions in the possible take-over of the SP by the entryists, and the remaking of the Party into a revolutionary force. See also Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 791, relying on an interview conducted with Shachtman, 25 May 1951. On Shachtman's youth appeal see Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic, 1987), 41; Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 83; Julius Jacobson, "The Two Deaths of Max Shachtman," *New Politics*, 10 (Winter 1973), 96; Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982), 50; and on the Draper brothers' debates James P. Cannon interviewed by Sidney Lens, "Questions of American Radicalism," 16 July 1974, in *James P. Cannon: A Political Tribute*, 40. Trotsky's 1929 comments on the American Socialist Party are in Leon Trotsky, "Tasks of the American Opposition," May 1929, in George Breitman and Sarah Lovell, eds., *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1929]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1975), 132–133. See also Leon Trotsky, *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 274–276. Cannon's proletarian orientation is evident in the documentation presented above, but see for a more general statement, James P. Cannon, "Deeper into the Unions," in Cannon, *Notebook of an Agitator*, 106–107.

“expected a break,” Cannon replied, “No, we tried to prevent it,” adding, “We expected the Socialist Party itself to grow, and that we would grow with it.” But presented with an all-out opposition, the Trotskyists “had no choice” but to fight on an array of principled positions.³¹⁶

As the Socialist Party offensive against the Workers Party entryists was implemented with vigor, leaving the Trotskyists necessarily staking out a combative stand of political integrity, the die was cast in expulsions and an ossifying refusal of the SP apparatus to countenance dissent. Trotsky wrote Cannon a personal letter on 26 August 1937, congratulating his American supporter on the appearance of the *Socialist Appeal* and its manifesto breaking from the leadership of the Socialist Party. “Firm and militant,” Trotsky thought the document an excellent and fitting end to the United States entry. He was also delighted at the unanimity of the American Trotskyist ranks, which showed no signs of internal conflict, and he looked forward to the United States section playing “first fiddle” in an international movement that was willing to put on hold some proceedings until the Americans consolidated their house in a late December/New Year’s Day Chicago convention.³¹⁷

In Cannon’s view, entry had been a taxing and trying initiative. Yet it facilitated much good work, including trade union activities and interventions and campaigns like those associated with the Spanish Civil War and the defense of Trotsky in light of the calumnies of the Moscow trials, all of which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Through such activities and other work, the American Trotskyist entry into the SP drew somewhere between 300–1,000 recruits and supporters to revolutionary politics. “We had won over to our side the majority of Socialist youth and the majority of those Socialist workers really interested in the principles of Socialism and the Socialist revolution,” Cannon later concluded. Shachtman agreed, noting that “Our activities in the Socialist Party were an almost unqualified success,” adding that “The SP suffered a terrific blow from the split.” Cannon noted that the Socialist Party had been sidelined, an achievement that many liberal commentators deplored, but that revolutionaries applauded because the declining social democratic party was in actuality “an obstacle in the path of building a revolutionary” organization. “In the process of winning over and partly educating a few hundred new people,” Cannon wrote in 1940, “we also demolished the opportunist

316 Cannon, “Questions of American Radical History,” in *James P. Cannon: A Political Tribute*, 39.

317 Trotsky to Dear Friend, 26 August 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 414–415; Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929–1940* (New York: Vintage, 1965), 424–425.

party of Thomas and Co.” Prior to entry, it had been an “insuperable barrier” to revolutionary politics, but “the mass expulsion of the left wing” by “the two-by-four bureaucrats” – perhaps inevitable, but having the quality of a self-inflicted wound – left it a “pitiful heap of ruins, disregarded and despised.” Shachtman wrote to Trotsky at the end of August 1937 to convey the news that both the “centrists” and the “right” within the SP were “impotent.” Having “no perspective whatever of growth in the coming period,” the surviving leadership of the Party, Shachtman reported, was of the opinion that “if it had not been for the diabolical Trotskyists everything would have been all right.” But this subjective claim, however comforting for social democrats and revolutionaries alike, was as much hyperbole as it was a realistic judgement premised on a sober assessment of the available evidence relating to entry’s course.

Trotsky, whose view of the Socialist Party was always quite scathing, thought Thomas “called himself a Socialist as a result of a misunderstanding.” He considered the ongoing atrophy of the SP, regardless of whether a single new member had been won to the ranks of revolution, as an advance. An irascible Harry Roskolenko echoed such sentiments:

To enlarge our influence, we Trotskyists had joined the Socialist Party, which had contributed less than the Gibson Girls to the sociology of the day. We simply danced like Bolshevik ballerinas into their pink-hued china shop and announced that we had the key to every international situation. In less than a year with the Spanish Civil War still raging, we destroyed the Socialist Party’s courteous liberalism and its old maid-political practices, then we charged, bull-like, out of their now dismembered china shop.

Ever the glib commentator, Roskolenko’s quips bypassed cavalierly the intensity of the struggle within the American Trotskyist leadership that animated entry’s entanglements, both as purpose and as practice. He also sidestepped the hard work and diligent effort that characterized Cannon’s west coast sojourn in a Socialist Party where class struggle issues actually came very much to the forefront. But Roskolenko did manage to capture something of entry’s success: Trotskyists joined the Socialists, talked to those who showed themselves to be interested in revolutionary politics, engaged in mass work and mobilizations with militant youth and workers, and walked those amenable to revolutionary politics over to a new orientation. “Our gain,” Roskolenko concluded, was almost one thousand “young socialists.”³¹⁸

318 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 251–252; James

Cannon, now back in New York, his California stint anything but a vacation, was arguably the key figure in what Roskolenko referred to as a Trotskyist charge out of the Socialist Party.³¹⁹ Where and how the bull charged, in the immediate context and specific aftermath of the entryist experiment of American Trotskyism in the 1930s, was fundamental in determining the politics of the revolutionary left in a period of militant working-class upheaval. For better or for worse, the entry of the Workers Party members into the Socialist Party in 1936–37 set the stage on which dissident communism acted its particular theatre of revolt in the momentous last years of the tumultuous 1930s.

It also revealed Cannon's strengths and weaknesses as a leader within this process. Against the cliquism of Abern, Cannon offered a politics of principle and a willingness, like his old Industrial Workers of the World mentor, Vincent St. John, to throw aside factional considerations and promote and develop cadre on the basis of their demonstrated capabilities. Thus Cannon, knowing full well that Hansen was an Abernite, nevertheless advocated for the young militant to be sent to Mexico to serve as one of Trotsky's trusted bodyguards and drivers, at a time when such jobs were both extremely important for Trotsky's safety and provided select American comrades with a privileged intimacy and access to the revolutionary movement's world leader. Cannon was even willing, in late April 1937, his appreciation of Abern as an "intriguer" notwithstanding, to consider proposing Abern as Secretary of the Trotskyist Club within the SP. As the battle with the ostensible left-wing Oehlerites heated up prior to the Socialist Party entry, it was Cannon who nominated an ultra-leftist such as Zack to special status as a New York district trade union organizer. He believed that the recent recruit to the Workers Party from the Communist Party might well have connections to African American workers and to militants among "independent unionists." The same kind of objective commitment to capability and possibility, devoid of factional consideration, was evident in Cannon's sponsoring of the black Oehlerite Simon Williamson, and relocating him from Kansas

P. Cannon, *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972), 154; James P. Cannon, "Ten Years of Struggle for a Workers Party," *Socialist Appeal*, 22 October 1938; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 140–142, which also contains retrospective negative assessments of entryism by Manny Geltman and Bert Cochran; Shachtman to Trotsky, 30 August 1937, Roll 3, Reel 3346, MS Papers; Fleischman, *Norman Thomas*, 303; "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 264, 300–301; Harry Roskolenko, *When I Was Last on Cherry Street* (New York: Stein and Day, 1965), 168.

319 Subsequent commentators have tended to either downplay or ignore Cannon's contribution. See, for instance, Jacobson, "The Two Deaths of Max Shachtman," 97: "By far the most effective Trotskyist spokesman, whether in factional debate or public rally, was Shachtman." See also Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 83.

City to head up the Workers Party activities among New York African Americans. There is no evidence that Cannon ever engaged, in this period of entryism of the mid-to-late 1930s, with the kind of unprincipled bloc combinations, in which agreements were made to “horse-trade” votes for specific factional figures in elections to the Workers Party National Committee, a practice common among the Oehler and Weber groups.³²⁰

Cannon also took up the entryist project without illusions, but with genuine commitments. Understanding that this was a *tactic* in consolidating the forces of a revolutionary vanguard, Cannon was unwavering in his resolve to build the possibility of a Fourth International with a strong American component. That this meant clearing the debris of centrism and worse from the terrain of class struggle, moving advocates of Musteism further to the left, stopping the drift of potentially revolutionary workers to either the Stalinist Communist Party or Lovestone's Right Opposition, even contributing to the ongoing demoralization of the Socialist Party, has always sat uneasily with Cannon's more liberal critics. The lure of an all-inclusive party of the left, somehow constructed in ways that transcend the strategic differences separating distinct strands adhering to counter-posed politics of revolution and social democratic reform has historically been an attractive panacea. Cannon functioned within this period, not with the purpose of *destruction*, as his detractors have so often suggested, but with the intent of *construction*. He did what he could to see that this took place *within* the Socialist Party, appreciating the long-term unlikelihood of that prospect. That these oppositions often met at the dialectical interface of the creation of something new and invigorated and the demise of something old and spent, goes without saying. This did not mean, however, that Cannon did not work to build militant revolutionary politics, both inside the Socialist Party, when that was doable, and ultimately outside of that declining organization when this proved impossible. And it was precisely Cannon's orientation to entryism as mass work within a Socialist Party harboring but also handicapping intellectuals, workers, and youth struggling to embrace the politics of revolutionary socialism, that separated him so decisively in this period from many of his longstanding Trotskyist comrades. Too often, they were safely ensconced in their understandings of revolutionary politics as abstract, if rhetorically entrancing, speechifying; the building of cliques; the construction of unprincipled blocs; or the making of alliances with leadership strata too often compromised and ill-equipped to take basic class struggle stands. Cannon rejected such

320 See Harry Ring interview, 13 February 1974, 6–7; Hansen, “The Abern Clique,” 28; Shachtman, *Marxist Politics or Unprincipled Combinationism?* 47, 39.

dead-ends, and struck out in his California entryist labors in an entirely different direction. He blended adroitly an understanding of the protracted practice of principled party building with the everyday mass work that put on public display precisely *why* revolutionary politics was the answer many disaffected workers and dissident youth sought. This proved, in the end, the path that needed to be followed if Trotsky's turn into the social democratic milieu of the mid-1930s was to gain ground for the revolutionary left.³²¹ Cannon's orientation, undertaken against the directions and even derision of so many leading New York-based comrades, was confirmed in the successful recruitment of a significant layer of workers and youth to revolutionary politics. The United States, as it turns out, was the French turn's most decisive success, and this had much to do with Cannon's perspective and perseverance, his patience and his perspicacity.

But for all of this accomplishment, Cannon's foibles and shortcomings as a leader, of which he was well aware, were also on display in the mid-1930s.³²² Worn down by factional struggle, Cannon could resort to presumptuous and precipitous organizational resolution of political conflict, especially if he was convinced that there was no possible reconciliation of opposing views. In his dealings with Oehler, Stamm, and Batsky, understandable as was his impatience with their sectarian stand and often egregious violation of party discipline, it is possible that Cannon lost an opportunity to keep a contingent of genuine leftists within the fold of revolutionary Trotskyism. Instead, this trio and their supporters were banished to an isolated political wilderness, out of which they would never find their way. Cannon's connections to Oehler, Stamm, and Batsky were of such a deep and longstanding nature, it is surprising that he could not find a means to temper the sectarianism and intransigence that characterized an imploding politics of self-destruction. Abern's inclinations to intrigue and clandestine cliquism, animated by anti-Cannon vituperativeness, as reprehensible as they were, might have been abated if not vanquished were Cannon able to reach out, again, to an old and valued comrade. Convincing Abern that his place in the revolutionary movement was indeed appreciated (a kind of recognition Abern obviously craved), was a position Cannon as much as anyone

321 There is a useful anecdotal account of Cannon's California entryist practice in Frank Lovell's comments in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 130–135. See also the general statement in Ring interview, 8 March 1974, 15–16.

322 Cannon, as all who knew him well, and as his own correspondence and private notes reveal, was not without an assessment of his own foibles. As Joseph Hansen later commented: "Jim had the capacity to recognize his own faults and weaknesses. To close friends, he even overemphasized them, thinking he had more than the usual share." Joseph Hansen in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 20.

held to, but rarely if ever managed to convey to Abern himself.³²³ Finally, Cannon's alienation from the New York center's Club during his California entryist work in 1936–37 was, again, not without cause, but his communications to his co-leaders in the Trotskyist movement undoubtedly lacked balance and constituted an unnecessarily inflammatory correspondence that could have been conducted with less personal condemnation and more tact. The Abernites were not wrong to characterize Cannon's communications of the time as given to ultimatums, non-cooperative in their tone.³²⁴

Why did Cannon function in this manner? He was known, from his earliest days in the revolutionary movement, as someone "with a charming personality, when he chose to be charming." The answer perhaps lies in Cannon's inclination to choose to be amiable and patiently pedagogical when the demand was to build a new revolutionary organization or advance along the road to that end. Once someone had made the commitment to revolutionary party building, however, Cannon perhaps felt that if they were to be a leader they were required to face, not so much his charm, but his arguments, his reason, his evidence, and his understanding of the revolutionary program. He behaved differently towards Swabeck, Spector, Abern, Burnham, Shachtman, and others in the leading ranks of Trotskyism, than he did towards Musteite militants gravitating to revolutionary politics, a young Joe Hansen, or left-wing workers drawn to the Socialist Party in California. To the latter he was, as Alexander Bittelman once characterized him in the early days of the underground Communist Party's formation, "a caretaker of a large experimental institution or laboratory, moving about various machines, tools, gadgets, testing tubes, etc., making sure they operate properly, oiling, fixing, changing, improving, and adjusting. ... His humor and his wit played no small part in all of that."³²⁵ Cannon clearly thought that as part of a leadership team, it was incumbent on equals in the Trotskyist movement to weight into every fray with all of their experience, rigor, and even vehemence. This was how he imagined democratic centralism to work, and it

323 Abern's need to be recognized, and his clique's response to this, can be discerned from Hansen, "The Abern Clique," esp. 21, 24, 26, 28, 31, with one Abernite commenting in correspondence: "I don't want you to get the impression that I am a worshipper of Marty but I know his value to the movement and it is because I realize what a loss the movement will sustain if it loses Marty that I feel particularly keen about any attempts to kick him around as, unfortunately, has been done so many times in the past. It is unfortunately a weakness of Marty's to be unduly sensitive about such things ..."

324 Hansen, "The Abern Clique," 20.

325 Alexander Bittelman, "Things I Have Learned: An Autobiography," Boxes 1–2, Collection 62, Unpublished Manuscript, 357–359, Alexander Bittelman Papers, Tamiment Institute, New York University Bobst Library, New York, New York.

dictated, as well, that the rough-and-tumble of developing positions within the leadership would not, Abern-like, be broadcast to the rank-and-file in a transparent attempt to curry clique favoritisms, solidifying cultist relations among leading figures of the movement and impressionable youth and rank-and-file workers. Cannon's seeming aloofness was the antithesis of Abern's personalized, gossipy interactions with his clique followers, and it allowed comrades to develop their own understandings about political controversies and the direction campaigns should follow. But it also translated into what one Trotskyist referred to as the "psychological uneasiness" felt "walking with a silent Cannon down the street." Even as Hansen warmed to Cannon as he collaborated with him on *Labor Action*, he still regarded the seasoned Kansas revolutionary as a "cold, grim politician."³²⁶

This Cannonesque relation to both the ranks and the leading cadre of American Trotskyism could, perhaps, have been softened somewhat, without any undue sacrifice of principle. His preeminence in the movement was such that Cannon might well have extended more of his charm, understanding, and empathy to other leading figures than he was perhaps able to bestow. As Trotsky was inclined to emphasize, patience and tolerance in the midst of factional contests inside the revolutionary movement necessarily demanded more of majorities than of minorities. This axiom could also be extended to leaders whose authority so often demanded decisive stands, but who were also called on to be magnanimous in the face of criticism from the ranks and layers of secondary cadre. This is something that Cannon clearly appreciated more in his later years, than he did in the mid-1930s, when so much seemed to be at stake, and immediately so, in building the American section of the nascent Fourth International.³²⁷

At his best, Cannon always functioned, in Hansen's words, "as a team man, completely conscious of the power of the leadership team, and a master at constructing one; that is, a well-balanced group composed of contrasting types whether one-sided or many sided, including some always inclined to be critical, and some certain to reflect the opinion of this or that layer."³²⁸ There was a good deal of this best Cannon evident in 1934–37, but there was also a sug-

³²⁶ Hansen, "The Abern Clique," 31, 17.

³²⁷ For Cannon's later appreciation of a more tolerant orientation to leading comrades see James P. Cannon, "Don't Strangle the Party," in *Building the Revolutionary Party: An Introduction to James P. Cannon* (Chippendale, NSW, Australia: New Course Publications, 1997), 51–74, which consists of Cannon's letters relating to an attempt to discipline Swaback as a member of the Socialist Workers Party for his views on China and Maoism.

³²⁸ Hansen in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 21.

gestion of a lesser Cannon, understandably flawed in his inability to bring his own superior side to the fore.³²⁹ This all indicated both the possibilities and resilience of American Trotskyism, as well as the somewhat fragile forces of a collective leadership through which ran, in 1936–37, Cannon's considerable authority and accomplishment, as well as a demonstrably unstable Burnham-Abern-Shachtman axis.

- 329 A trivial anecdote illustrates this. As Shachtman toured California in 1937, speaking on "The Spanish Revolution in Danger," tensions between the two key founders of American Trotskyism remained to be worked out. Cannon chaired a meeting where Shachtman spoke at the San Pedro Carpenter's Hall. Among the crowd were a group of Yugoslav tuna fleet fishermen. Shachtman, an orator of impressive rhetorical reach, was given to the kind of hyperbole that went over well with students, intellectuals and those familiar with a certain New York style. The Yugoslav fishermen were not likely to pick up on some of Shachtman's argumentative props, which included metaphorical exaggeration. Thus during his speech, Shachtman referred to every rifle and bullet sent by the Soviet Union to the Loyalist combatants being labeled with the instructions, "To Be Used Only for the Defense of Bourgeois Democracy." Taking this statement literally, the immigrant tuna trawlers quickly determined that the speaker lacked credibility. Knowing something of the Soviet bureaucracy, one of the workers huffed, "That's a lie. They wouldn't go to all that trouble." The contingent got up and left. The meeting disrupted, Cannon sat in the Chair smiling, but doing and saying nothing. After the meeting, Cannon laughed, justifying his silence and inaction: "I thought that would teach Max a lesson – always keep in mind who you are talking to." But the educational value of the moment could well have been extended, and the movement advanced, if Cannon had intervened, *explaining* to the disgruntled Yugoslavs that Shachtman had not been suggesting an actual tagging of all arms to Spain with a physical label of political use. This kind of thing fed into Abern-ite understandings of *both* Cannon and Shachtman, who were characterized as "people whose qualities do not run along organizational lines, people who are prone to work by themselves in their capacity of journalist or orator," and likely to give the "cold shoulder" to others in the movement. See Frank Lovell in *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 135; Hansen, "The Abern Clique," 27–28.

Trials, Tragedies, and Trade Unions

1 1937's Imperative: Assimilating Revolution's Recruits

Cannon's role in the development of American Trotskyism in the mid-to-late 1930s was as a leader on the front lines in the struggle to cohere the cadre of a viable revolutionary organization. His political time was invested in painstaking deliberations with a spectrum of potential revolutionaries, as well as difficult negotiations with others whom Cannon knew would never stay the difficult course of class struggle politics. Both fusion with the Musteites and entry into the Socialist Party [SP] brought Cannon into direct contact with dedicated young men and women committed to the revolutionary cause, and this revitalized him. Alongside the advances registered in Minneapolis in 1934, this new climate of possibility, foreshadowing the founding of a section of the Fourth International, established Cannon as Trotsky's most trusted collaborator in the United States. This solidified his place at the head of a movement that seemed to have left behind the doldrums of the "dog days" of the early 1930s.

The intense and personalized factionalism of these years nonetheless cast long shadows across the relations among the pioneers of the Left Opposition in North America. Cannon was decisively estranged from Maurice Spector and Martin Abern. This latter duo remained in the same political organization as Cannon, but by 1937 there were multiple tensions and animosities simmering below the surface of basic agreement over policies. Even Shachtman, whose mercurial oscillations with respect to his alignment with or separation from Cannon tended to end in his finding a way to work productively with his oldest ally, exhibited many twists and turns over the course of the 1930s. This led to doubts as to the steadfastness of his judgement, as Trotsky himself came to realize.¹

1 One reflection of this was Trotsky's reluctance to trust Shachtman in certain areas, especially those that related to Trotsky's personal concerns. In February 1937 he wrote: "You suggest to me that I give Max Shachtman full power in engaging in litigations, etc. I must say that I appreciate Max highly politically and journalistically but not for practical matters. I fear he will lose my full power or forget to use it in the necessary moments." Trotsky to Harold Isaacs, 24 February 1937, Socialist Party Entry, Workers Party, Chrono File, January – October 1937, File WP:

The heated exchanges that punctuated the entryist experiment were soon displaced by the Socialist Party leadership's across the board attack on all Trotskyists. Even a common struggle to resist bureaucratic expulsion never managed to bridge the acute differences that surfaced within the Trotskyist leadership in the mid-to-late 1930s. Cannon could see that many of the new elements now at the forefront of the movement, like the brilliantly talented James Burnham, lacked the political resolve of former allies such as Hugo Oehler and Tom Stamm.

If these were the socio-political trajectories of relations among the leading cadre of American Trotskyism, moreover, it was also apparent that like tendencies were at work within the rank-and-file. The expanded advocates of American Trotskyism in 1937 included an infusion of Socialist Party militants such as Sarah Lovell, Robert and Margaret Dullea, Tom Giunta, Sol Grauer, Sam Randall, and James Kutcher as well as Young People's Socialist League activists, the most prominent of which was Hal Draper.² They joined a group in which many former Musteites were only partially assimilated. In order to consolidate this rather spectacular growth, American Trotskyists needed to politically integrate a somewhat unevenly developed cohort of revolutionary recruits to the program developed by the Left Opposition and the lessons learned in the earlier mass work of the Communist League of America. This process paralleled the rise and fall of the entryist experiment, was intricately related to it, but also, in the end, was distinguished from this exercise in party building. Central to this endeavor were three distinct, but overlapping undertakings.

First, was the international campaign to exonerate Trotsky from Stalinist allegations that the Left Opposition leader was guilty of advocating and advising supporters to engage in individual acts of terror against the Soviet regime. The bogus charges included assassination and sabotage of industry; colluding with foreign powers such as Nazi Germany; and attempting to restore capitalism. These specious claims and outrageous slanders, the origins of which can be traced back years, erupted with a vengeance after the December 1934 murder of Sergei Mironovich Kirov, a leading figure in the Leningrad Bolshevik

9–28 February 1937, from Trotsky Papers, Harvard, Prometheus Research Library, New York, New York [hereafter PRL].

2 For commentary on some of these Socialist Party militants see Paul Le Blanc and Thomas Barrett, eds., *Revolutionary Labor Socialist: The Life, Ideas, and Comrades of Frank Lovell* (Union City, NJ: Smyrna Press, 2000), 247–262, 305–318, 342–348.

Party,³ and climaxed in a series of 1936–38 Moscow Show Trials.⁴ The result was a Stalinist purge of “virtually all of the living leaders of the Russian Revo-

- 3 For mainstream accounts of the assassination of Kirov, shot by Communist Party member Leonid Nikolaev, see Robert Conquest, *Stalin and the Kirov Murder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Amy Knight, *Who Killed Kirov? The Kremlin's Greatest Mystery* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1999); Matthew E. Lenoe, *The Kirov Murder and Soviet History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010). The issue of whether Nikolaev acted on his own or was functioning as an agent of Stalin has animated scholarship for some time, with recent evidence suggesting that the murder was the act of a solitary disgruntled individual. This was the view put forward, as well, in Victor Serge's fictional account of the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* (New York: Doubleday, 1950). Trotsky's initial response to the Kirov murder is Leon Trotsky, “The Stalinist Bureaucracy and the Kirov Murder: A Reply to Friends in America,” 28 December 1934, in George Breitman and Bev Scott, eds., *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1934–1935]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1971), 112–131. Trotsky stressed that an individual act of terror was being used by Stalin to create “an amalgam” of political oppositionists with no links to Nikolaev, who were then targeted as complicit in the terrorist act. Trotsky concluded that, “*To the terrorist act of Nikolaev, Stalin replies by redoubling the terror against the party*” (117).
- 4 The Moscow Trials of 1936–38 had been preceded by trials, commencing in 1928, that targeted “wreckers and groups of diversionists,” among them ostensible Mensheviks and supposedly dissident “Industrial” and “Peasant” parties that were socially constructed by the Stalinist secret police apparatus. Trotsky himself was taken in by these allegations, not yet able to understand the consolidating Stalinist state's willingness to engineer frame-up trials. In this early period, cut off from access to much-needed information by his own marginalization and exile to Alma Alta, and lulled into rapprochement with Stalin's seemingly left-turn against the kulaks, Trotsky was convinced of the guilt of those falsely accused. This would later rebound against him, with the prosecutor of the Moscow Trials linking these late 1920s victims of early Stalinist repression to “Trotsky's struggle against our Party, against the Soviet government” Quoted in John Dewey, Suzanne LaFollette, Benjamin Stolberg, eds., *Not Guilty: Report of the Commission of Inquiry Into the Charges Made Against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), 387. On the 1928 trials as a template for the later purge trials see Friedrich Adler, *The Witchcraft Trial in Moscow* (New York: Pioneer, 1937), and for a critique of Trotsky's misreadings of the first trials see Albert Glotzer, *Trotsky: Memoir & Critique* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989), 241–244; Roy Medvedev, *Stalin and Stalinism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 90–91. The context of this period is outlined in Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921–1929* (New York: Vintage, 1959), esp. 395–471. Between 1928 and 1932 a “bloc” of oppositions to Stalin crystallized, but they by no means confirmed later Stalinist allegations of their counter-revolutionary nature and their attempt to sabotage the progress and well-being of the Soviet Union. See Pierre Broué, “The ‘Bloc’ of the Oppositions Against Stalin in the USSR in 1932,” *Revolutionary History*, 9 (No. 4, 2008), 161–192. By the mid-1930s, Trotsky had come to appreciate the depths to which Stalinism would plummet with respect to the use of cynical criminal charges and courtroom charades. See his extensive, relevant writings from January 1937, gathered in Naomi Allen and George Breitman, eds., *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1978), 56–186; and Leon Trotsky, *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence*, edited and translated by Alan Woods (London: Wellred Books, 2016), esp. 583, 621–649.

lution,”⁵ abject confessions of guilt and recantations by most of these Old Bolsheviks, often followed by condemnation to death, and a ruthless “cleansing” of the political economy. Hundreds of thousands of workers, peasants, intellectuals, party members, military leaders, and government officials were charged with various crimes against the socialist state, incarcerated, executed, exiled to labor camps, or otherwise “disappeared.” Maria Joffe, a Trotskyist whose husband Adolph committed suicide in 1927, his last letter to Trotsky urging his friend and comrade to remain steadfast in his opposition to Stalin, survived decades in a Siberian labor camp. Her memoir, *One Long Night: A Tale of Truth* (1978), outlined how “tortures, murders, [and] mass shootings of many thousands of Trotskyists” in the outposts of Vorkuta and Kolyma widened indiscriminately to include a broad swath of those judged disloyal to the Stalinist regime. This resulted in the “complete destruction of the October and Civil War generation” which, according to their prosecutors, had been “infected by Trotskyist heresy.”⁶

In the Moscow Trials targeting the Old Bolsheviks, Trotsky was a central figure in the proceedings, and he and his son Sedov were convicted in absentia by the Stalinist prosecutor, A.Y. Vyshinsky, of masterminding acts of terror against the Soviet Union. Orchestrating a parade of humiliating self-incrimination by the Old Bolsheviks placed in the Stalinist dock, Vyshinsky reveled in hearing architects of the Russian Revolution declare themselves guilty of counter-revolutionary perfidy, double-dealing, and treason. He elicited this statement from Zinoviev: “through Trotskyism I arrived at fascism. Trotskyism is a variety of fascism, and Zinovievism is a variety of Trotskyism.” “I demand that

5 Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1950s* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 128.

6 The standard academic account downplays the significance of Trotskyism and, indeed, the politics of Stalinism, and widens the treatment of the purge process of the 1930s to include induced-famine, increasing the toll of repression significantly. See Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties* (New York: Macmillan, 1970). For a critique of Conquest and a convincing and focused assessment of the central place of Trotskyism in the political purges of the 1930s see Vadim Z. Rogovin, *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror* (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 1998). Trotskyist comment on the confessions of the Old Bolsheviks includes Max Shachtman, *Behind the Moscow Trial* (New York: Pioneer, 1936), 47–53; Allen and Breitman, eds., *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 56–63, 131–132, 140–141, 149. For a conventional Cold War era account that contains much material see Nathan Leites and Elsa Bernaut, *Rituals of Liquidation: Bolsheviks on Trial* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1954). Note as well, for the extent of the repression, Moshe Lewin, *The Soviet Century* (London: Verso, 2005), 106–107; Paul Le Blanc, *Leon Trotsky* (London: Reaktion, 2015), 114–115; and Maria Joffe, *One Long Night: A Tale of Truth* (London: New Park, 1978), quoted 190.

dogs gone mad should be shot, every one of them," huffed the prosecutor.⁷ In the United States a widely circulated Communist Party pamphlet insisted in 1935 that Trotsky be exposed as "a counter-revolutionary renegade who inspires the murder of revolutionary leaders."⁸ As Trotsky struggled to combat this campaign of vilification, an American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky [ACDLT] was launched at the initiative of Trotsky's followers in the United States. This Committee spearheaded the John Dewey-chaired Preliminary Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Against Leon Trotsky, which convened for eight days in Coyoacan, Mexico, where Trotsky was by this time living, allowing him to testify at length.⁹

Second, Trotskyists in the United States battled to expose the betrayals of the Communist International, exemplified by the Soviet Union's defeatist interventions in the Spanish Civil War. Insurgents critical of Stalinism were militarily sacrificed on the altar of sectarianism and the insatiable appetite of a degenerating workers' state for the containment of revolutionary alternative. Anarchists and other left militants were murdered to abort the emergence of a revolutionary threat to Spanish capitalism and the Popular Front government which sought to administer it.

Third, Trotskyists grappled with the militant upsurge of mass production workers unleashed by the fight for industrial unionism and the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations [CIO]. Participation in this struggle was crucial to building a Trotskyist party in the United States.

7 See Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929–1940* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 333–335, although the entire volume is of relevance in understanding Stalinism's anti-Trotsky campaign. See, as well, Victor Serge, "The Hangman's Year," *Socialist Appeal*, 18 December 1937; A.Y. Vyshinsky, *Trotskyism in the Service of Fascism Against Socialism and Peace* (New York: Workers Library, 1936). J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–1939* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999) presents explanations of why the old Bolsheviks "confessed." For a recent discussion of Vyshinsky, drawing on documentation and personal reflections, but shying away from a thorough discussion of the centrality of Trotsky and Trotskyism in the Moscow Trials, see Arkady Vaksberg, *The Prosecutor and the Prey: Vyshinsky and the 1930s Moscow Show Trials* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990).

8 M.J. Olgin, *Trotskyism: Counter-Revolution in Disguise* (New York: Workers Library, 1935).

9 Two essential texts are: Dewey, LaFollete, and Stolberg, eds., *Not Guilty*; John Dewey et al., eds., *The Case of Leon Trotsky: Report of Hearings on the Charges Made Against Him in the Moscow Trials* (New York: Merit, 1968). Much more concise, but also more broad-ranging, is Shachtman, *Behind the Moscow Trial*, supplemented by the more focused discussion of 1936's events in Friedrich Adler, *The Witchcraft Trial in Moscow* (New York: Pioneer, 1937). For an example of the Stalinist presentation of the case see *Report of the Court Proceedings: The Case of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Centre* (Moscow: Peoples Commissariat of Justice of the USSR, 1936).

All such activities, fought on three distinct but related fronts, ultimately ran into the fundamental divide separating Stalinists and Trotskyists. This entailed combining revolutionary polemics and propaganda with non-partisan labor defense campaigns and other forms of united front activity. A delicate balance had to be sustained between maintaining principled positions and collaborating with liberals like Dewey and the journalist and art critic, Suzanne LaFollette, a niece of Robert LaFollette, Sr., who made a name for herself editing the *New Freeman* and whose writing often appeared in *The Nation*. Collaboration of this kind necessitated certain concessions and adjustments, of course, but also tenaciousness. Cannon was involved in all of this, but the primary responsibility for working in this way was born by New York-based cadres such as George Novack, Herbert Solow, Felix Morrow, Harold Issacs, and Max Shachtman.

2 The Origins of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky

The ACDLT had a somewhat complicated beginning. It was the result of two developments: an original mid-1930s mobilization to secure Trotsky asylum; and a parallel campaign to build a non-partisan labor defense organization.

Trotsky's troubled exile, anticipated in the last chapter of his *My Life*, written in 1929 and titled "The Planet Without a Visa,"¹⁰ had taken a turn for the worse in 1934–36. Banished from the Soviet Union, Trotsky struggled to find a home in a world caught between the rock of Stalinist calumny and relentless persecution and the hard place of a Europe torn asunder by the rise of fascism and the threat of war. Trotsky's daughter, Zinaida, committed suicide in Berlin in 1933, a few weeks before Hitler came to power. His youngest son, Sergei, apolitical and living in the Soviet Union, was arrested in 1935, along with all of Trotsky's relatives still residing in Russia. Living incognito in France at the time, Trotsky's health was poor, and he was hounded by Russian White Guards, French fascists, Comintern-sympathetic Popular Frontists, and Communists, all of whom pressured the French government to deport the dissident revolutionary.

Responding to Soviet pressure, and concerned that its fragile people's front coalition was vulnerable to an eruption of working-class discontent that a figure like Trotsky, however restricted in his political involvements, might ignite, French officials made the conditions of refuge increasingly stringent. Trot-

10 Leon Trotsky, *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 567–583.

sky and his wife Natalia were confined to a tiny Alpine village. They lived alone, without secretaries and companionship. Eventually Trotsky's asylum was revoked entirely, and he was reluctantly admitted to Norway, a "guest" of the Labour Party government, elements of which tried to extract from Trotsky a pledge not to involve himself in political actions hostile to any government with which the Scandinavian country enjoyed "friendly" relations. Completing his analysis of the role of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the degeneration of the Russian workers' republic, *The Revolution Betrayed* (1937), Trotsky was nonetheless situated precariously. He lived up to his commitment to avoid any involvement in Norwegian politics, but right-wing elements monitored his movements and attempted to undermine his asylum, while the police kept the international revolutionary under watch. Fearful of deportation, and increasingly troubled by lack of word about his son's well-being in Moscow, as well as news that Zinoviev, Kamenev, and fourteen others were charged with terrorism and treasonous collusion with the Gestapo, Trotsky's stay in Norway was difficult and precarious. He was named in the Moscow Trials allegations as a chief defendant, and the Soviet Ambassador demanded the Old Bolshevik's expulsion from Norway, threatening economic sanctions. Placed under house arrest, Trotsky suffered through months of agonizing indecision before he and Natalia, treated as internees, were removed under police escort to a petrol tanker that transported them to Mexico. They were welcomed upon their arrival, 9 January 1937, by delegates of President Lazaro Cardenas and a small contingent of supporters that included Max Shachtman, George Novack, and Frida Kahlo, whose husband Diego Rivera had been influential in convincing the government to grant Trotsky asylum.¹¹

In these difficult years from 1934–36, the Communist League of America/Workers Party publicized Trotsky's travails and called on the Socialist Party,

11 For Trotsky's troubled state of mind during this period see Leon Trotsky, *Trotsky's Diary in Exile, 1935* (New York: Atheneum, 1963). The context is covered in some detail in Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast*, esp. 285–355; Jean van Heijenoort, *With Trotsky in Exile: From Prinkipo to Coyoacan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); Bertram D. Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (New York: Stein and Day, 1963), 237–239; Letizia Argenteri, *Tina Modotti: Between Art and Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 124–125. On the preparations for Trotsky's asylum in Mexico see Swabeck to Cannon, 23 December 1936, Chrono File, January – October 1936, Folder WP: 15–31 December 1936; Max Shachtman to Leon Trotsky, 6 January 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: 1–13 January 1937, PRL; George Novack to Vincent Dunne, 21 November 1936, "General Organizational and Secretarial Correspondence, 1923–1956," Boxes 15–16/Reels 20–21, James P. Cannon Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin [hereafter JPC Papers].

the trade unions, and others to mobilize in defense of Trotsky and his right to asylum in the United States. Cannon closed a *Militant* article, "The defense of Trotsky's life at the present moment is a duty enjoined upon the labor movement in order to defend itself," and he was a featured speaker at a 22 April 1934 mass rally at Irving Plaza, called to speak on Trotsky's behalf.¹²

This work continued into 1935, with Workers Party member George Novack taking the lead. Novack worked for E.P. Dutton as an advertising executive, and was part of the radicalization of a cosmopolitan circle of Jewish intellectuals around the *Menorah Journal*. With the economic collapse of the Great Depression and the threatening portent of European fascism, figures involved in this movement, like Felix Morrow, Diana and Lionel Trilling, and Novack and his wife, Elinor Rice, came to the conclusion that "the socialist revolution and its extension held out the only realistic hope of saving the Jews, among others, from destruction." Active in the periphery of the Communist Party, Novack's early 1930s involvement included participation in the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners [NCDPP], an intellectual arm of the International Labor Defense [ILD], and he headed a Book Committee which forwarded reading material to such notable class-war prisoners as the McNamara brothers, Warren Billings, and Tom Mooney. E.P. Dutton actually gave Novack permission to store and ship books to over 100 incarcerated militants every month.¹³

A Trotskyist sympathizer inside the NCDPP, Herbert Solow, introduced Novack to the Communist League of America, whose call for a new International intrigued Novack and Morrow, both of whom were increasingly frustrated by Third Period Stalinism. As noted in an earlier chapter, when Communist Party thugs attacked an ostensibly "social fascist" Socialist Party rally at Madison Square Gardens in February 1934, Morrow and Novack, already committed Trotskyists, co-signed a letter of protest with 25 intellectuals, writers, and journalists. They were promptly denounced in the pages of the *New Masses* as "loop-de-loopers from Zionism to 'internationalism,'" imagined "Trotzkyites" whom Stalinists declared "enemies" to be used "for what they are worth."¹⁴

12 James P. Cannon, "Reaction Hounds Trotsky: Spectre of Communism in the Fourth International," and "Organize a Fight for the Right of Asylum in the U.S.," *The Militant*, 21 April 1934; "Capitalist Countries Close Their Doors to Leon Trotsky," *The Militant*, 5 May 1934.

13 George Novack, "Traditions and Guiding Ideas of the Socialist Workers Party in Defense Activity," in *Education for Socialists* (New York: SWP, July 1968), 4–5.

14 On Novack's origins in the *Menorah* group and development in this period see, among many possible sources, Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 47–64; Alan M. Wald, *James T. Farrell: The Revolutionary Socialist Years* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 47–57; Harry Ring interview with James P. Cannon, 24 October 1973, Unpublished typescript, 5–7 [hereafter Ring interview]; George Novack, "Radical Intellectuals in the 1930s," *Interna-*

As evidence mounted in 1934–35 of a vicious slander campaign against Trotsky by Comintern and Soviet state authorities,¹⁵ Novack took the initiative in organizing an American Committee for Asylum for Trotsky. The Committee was chaired by Quincy Howe, editor of *The Living Age*, and supported by Morris Ernst, General Counsel of the American Civil Liberties Union and a friend of the Roosevelt family. Its efforts to secure a place for Trotsky in the United States ran into a brick wall in the State Department, where there was a fear of disturbing “the diplomatic honeymoon with Moscow following Washington’s recognition of the Soviet Union.” The Committee’s attempts to persuade other countries in the western hemisphere to open their borders to Trotsky were also stymied. When Norway’s Labour Party government supposedly offered a safe haven, the Asylum Committee became dormant. At about this time, as well, in June 1935, Trotsky and his wife Natalia, agonizing about their son’s imprisonment in the Soviet Union, urged the creation of an “international commission of authoritative and conscientious people, known, needless to say, to be friends of the U.S.S.R.,” to investigate the repressive acts associated with the Kirov murder and more.¹⁶

The fleeting attempt to secure Trotsky asylum was paralleled by the development of a Trotskyist non-partisan labor defense counterpart to the Communist Party’s NCDPP. Solow, who joined the Communist League of America [CLA] in 1933, played a major role in this work. He also provided valuable journalistic coverage of the activity of the historic 1934 Minneapolis teamsters’ strikes in both *The Nation* and Local 574’s publication, *The Organizer*. Solow and Shachtman effectively served as co-editors of the latter publication during the protracted battles that broke the back of employer resistance to unionism in Minneapolis. Much appreciated by the combative teamsters, Solow was a talented writer and energetic activist whose personal anxieties often prevented him from addressing mass audiences. He invested much of his political energy in labor defense, championing the cause of political prisoners through writing and fund-raising, allowing Solow to largely avoid public speaking. Sidney Hook remembered Solow decades later as having “a special gift for dramatiz-

tional Socialist Review, 29 (March – April 1968), 21–34. On the contrasting responses to the February 1934 letter of protest see “Unintelligent Fanaticism,” *New Masses*, 27 March 1934, and “The Intellectuals Revolt Against Stalinism Hooliganism,” *The Militant*, 10 March 1934.

15 Leon Trotsky, “Trotsky Answers Indictment: Links GPU with Kirov Assassination,” *The Militant*, 19 January 1935; Nathalie Trotsky, “Sergei Trotsky Jailed by Stalin Bureaucrats: An Act of Vengeance – Mother Asks for Investigation of Latest Series of Persecutions,” *The Militant*, 29 June 1935.

16 George Novack, “How Trotsky Defense Committee was Organized,” *World Outlook*, 3 (15 October 1965), 38–43; L. Trotsky, *Trotsky’s Diary in Exile, 1935*, 129–133.

ing civil and human rights cases.” Cannon, Solow, Novack, Rose Karsner, and A.J. Muste collaborated in the formation of a Provisional Committee for Labor Defense prior to the fusion of the CLA and the American Workers Party [AWP]. Solow undoubtedly played a role in bringing the two organizations together, as he had close ties with AWP intellectuals such as Hook, James Burnham, James Rorty, and V.F. Calverton.

As discussed in Chapter 3 above, in late April 1934, the provisional labor defense committee attracted 400 workers to a fund-raising rally at the Stuyvesant Casino on behalf of Anthony Bellussi, an anti-fascist militant facing deportation to Italy, where he would likely be executed. On the podium were Carlo Tresca, Quincy Howe, Novack, Muste, and Cannon. All of them were committed to the creation of a new labor defense organization capable of transcending the sectarian limitations of Stalinist-led bodies like the ILD, compromised in the eyes of many progressives after the Madison Square Garden assault on a Socialist Party rally. The meeting raised \$225 to pay for Bellussi to travel to a country other than Italy, and also passed a resolution “protesting the expulsion of Leon Trotsky from France and demanding right of asylum” for him in the United States.¹⁷

Such initiatives culminated in the creation of the Non-Partisan Defense League [NPLD], in which Solow, Novack, Morrow, John McDonald and other Trotskyists were active alongside non-Trotskyists such as Elliott Cohen and many non-aligned progressives. But Solow, unlike Novack, never adapted to the discipline of a Leninist organization; his involvement in the labor defense campaigns of the period was marked by frequent acts of indiscipline that alienated him from the circle of comrades around Cannon. Diana Trilling remembered Solow and Cohen as having a “taste for dispute and political maneuver, ... full of theory and factional vigor,” with Solow, in particular, given to “intrigue and conspiracy.” Indefatigable in his defense of class war prisoners such as Norman Mini, the leader of the Sacramento Cannery and Agricultural Workers Union, Solow liked to “freelance.” Rash in his decisions, he was inclined to announce commitments without the consideration and approval of his Workers Party comrades, provoking censure. Later, Solow sided with Oehler for a time, embracing the sectarian critique of the Workers Party entering the SP. He was particularly incensed when the Workers Party submitted to the SP leadership’s

17 Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers’ Strikes of 1934* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014), 153; Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion* (New York: Monad, 1972), 104–105, 150, 157, 184; Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 101–106; Sidney Hook, *Out of Step* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1987), 183; “400 Hail Move for New Defense at Bellussi Meet,” *The Militant*, 28 April 1934.

demand that the Trotskyists wrap up the Non-Partisan Labor Defense organization. This *fait accompli* was especially irksome because the Socialists had, early in 1935, violated a prior agreement not to set up a rival defense organization to the NPLD. The formation of the Workers Defense League [WDL] inside the Socialist Party in 1935–36, under the leadership of Norman Thomas, undermined the work of Solow, Morrow, and Novack, reneging on a commitment that Socialists and Trotskyists would work together. Adding insult to injury, Socialists demanded that the Trotskyist defense work be taken over by the weaker and more recently-established WDL. Despite his differences, Solow would continue to participate in the Trotskyist labor defense mobilizations, playing an important role in the ACDLT. Novack grew tired of Solow's machinations, writing to Vincent Ray Dunne that, "although Solow will work with us on special questions, he is as irreconcilable a political opponent as ever."¹⁸

These two "defense" initiatives undertaken by WP cadres in 1934–35 to secure asylum for Trotsky and defend class struggle militants from incarceration and deportation provided important groundwork for subsequent developments

18 Wald, *James T. Farrell*, 620–623; Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 108–110; Ring interview 9 September 1973, 3; Herbert Solow, *Union-Smashing in Sacramento: The Truth about the Criminal Syndicalist Trial* (New York: National Sacramento Appeal Committee, 1935); Diana Trilling, *The Beginning of the Journey: The Marriage of Diana and Lionel Trilling* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), 212, 205, 219; "United Defense Acts to Mobilize Labor in California Trial," *New Militant*, 26 January 1935; "NPLD Statement on Sacramento Case," *New Militant*, 9 February 1935; "Socialists Violate Agreement: Now Take Steps to Launch Sectarian Defense Organization," *New Militant*, 16 February 1935; Harry Fleischman, "Workers Defense League," in Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 848–849. There is much on the NPLD, especially relating to Felix Morrow's self-presentation as a disciplined foundation securing the non-partisan organization against the tides of Oehlerite factionalism and the inclination towards indiscipline on the part of his counterpart, Herbert Solow, in Non-Partisan Defense League, December 1934–December 1935, Folder 3, and Non-Partisan Labor Defense, 1935, from Walter Goldwater Papers, Folder 4, in File labeled, "Workers Party: Various Unprocessed," PRL. For a summary of the NPLD activities in 1935 see "The Non-Partisan Labor Defense: A Year of Activity, Success, and Service to the Working Class on All Fronts of the Radical and Labor Movement," *New Militant*, 30 November 1935. Solow's history as a Trotskyist commenced with him joining the CLA in 1933, but saw him exit the Workers Party at the time of the Oehler split. By December 1936, however, he had discontinued his relations with Oehler and, while not a member of the Workers Party entryists, he supported the movement to build the Fourth International and worked with Novack and others on defense issues associated with Trotsky. See Unsigned to Dear Comrades, 8 December 1936, Chrono File, January – December 1936, Folder WP: 1–14 December 1936, from Walter Goldwater Papers, PRL; George Novack to Vincent Dunne, 21 November 1936, "General Organizational and Secretarial Correspondence, 1923–1956," Boxes 15–16/Reels 20–21, JPC Papers.

in 1936 and 1937.¹⁹ The accelerating velocity of the Kremlin bureaucracy's repressive measures from the Kirov assassination to the Moscow Trials, made it urgently necessary to defend Trotsky against a mountain of bizarre and sinister charges levelled against him by Soviet judicial authorities. To meet this challenge, Cannon and his comrades established the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky [ACDLT]. Its activities soon resonated around the world.

3 The Non-partisan Origins of Trotsky's Defense

The new provisional committee to defend Trotsky made its debut in October – November 1936. At this point, with war threatening and the Moscow Trials, in the words of the writer James T. Farrell, having drawn “a line of blood” across the 1930s, there were hints that many American liberals, previously staunch supporters of Soviet policy, might waver in their obeisance to Stalin. The *Nation* ran a rare editorial on 10 October 1936, posing some mild questions about the courtroom procedures in Moscow. This so disturbed the Communist Party's *New Masses* that it countered with a condemnatory rejoinder, “The *Nation* and Trotsky,” castigating the liberal magazine's support for the “criminal activities” of oppositionists inside the Soviet Union.

If this was indeed the *Nation's* new position, sneered the *New Masses*, then it should come clean and declare itself a “Trotskyist mouthpiece,” an “organ of a counter-revolutionary band of conspirators and assassins.” This was enough to drive Freda Kirchwey, editor of the *Nation*, to resign from the Trotsky Defense Committee. She had originally been a signatory to the Committee's declared purpose of securing asylum for Trotsky and establishing an international Commission of Inquiry to examine and assess all evidence presented in the Moscow Trials. Shortly thereafter, in January 1937, Mauritz A. Hallgren, a progressive journalist who often contributed to the *Nation*, also quit the ACDLT, his resignation letter charging that the defense campaign was “an instrument of the Trotskyists for political intervention against the Soviet Union.” His complaint was quickly published in a widely-distributed Communist Party pamphlet. Like another prominent organ of liberal intellectual thought in the United States, the *New Republic*, the *Nation* soon backed away from challenging, or even scrutinizing, the wild allegations emanating from the Soviet Union, levelled against Trotsky and legions of so-called Trotskyists. *New York Times* writers like the

19 Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 130.

newspaper's Moscow correspondent, Walter Duranty, and Frank Kluckhohn, who was later sent to cover the Commission of Inquiry's Preliminary Coyoacan tribunal, did what they could to prevent Trotsky from receiving a fair hearing.²⁰

Trotsky wrote a stern rebuke to the *Nation*, which harbored both a pro-Stalinist contingent headed by Max Lerner and Maxwell Stewart, and a group favorably disposed to the ACDLT that included James T. Farrell confidante Margaret Marshall, with Kirchwey known to vacillate between the two. Trotsky later referred to "the intellectual and moral shallows of the *New Republic* and the *Nation*." But the Committee objected to sending the letter to the *Nation* on the grounds that Trotsky should meet with the editor himself, winning her over to his support. The suggestion from New York was that the internal crisis at the magazine was sufficiently delicate that more could well be lost than gained by publishing a blunt repudiation of its editorial placation of the Stalinists. Trotsky was having none of it, seeing in the New York-based Committee's prevarication a disturbing accommodation to Stalinism. He refused to meet Kirchwey in Mexico, and expressed astonishment that the Committee expected him to "discuss personally (not publicly) with people who will come to me to expose their doubts about my political honesty." Thinking his New York comrades "too con-

20 "The *Nation* and Trotsky," *New Masses*, 16 November 1936; "Committee Formed to Obtain Right of Asylum for Trotsky," *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (December 1936), 15–16; Wald, *James T. Farrell*, 58–61; George Novack, "Radical Intellectuals in the 1930s," *International Socialist Review*, 29 (March April 1968), 29. See also Mauritz A. Hallgren, *Why I Resigned from the Trotsky Defense Committee* (New York: International Publishers, 1937). Cannon would later challenge the *New Republic's* claims that former Communists turned Trotskyists had "furnished affidavits to aid the deportation of Harry Bridges." Cannon condemned this slur on "anonymous Trotskyists" and referred to the magazine offering "blessings to the Moscow frame-up trials." He concluded an angry correspondence: "the ex-liberal *New Republic* has merely become an unofficial organ of the frame-up and stool pigeon gang identified all over the world as Stalinists." Cannon to Editor of the *New Republic*, 22 February 1938; Bruce Bliven (*New Republic*) to Cannon, 24 February 1938, Cannon to Bliven, 9 March 1938, Reel 4, JPC Papers; "SWP Replies to Slander of New Republic; Ex-Liberal Organ Caught Lying in Issue of Bridges Ouster," *Socialist Appeal*, 5 March 1938. For Trotsky's comments on the two liberal magazines see Paul N. Siegel, *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art* (New York: Merit, 1970), 111. On Duranty and Kluckhohn see Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 130; Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 250, 266–270. In the 1930s, Kluckhohn was a friend of Frank Jellinek, well known as an outspoken Stalinist. Decades later, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Kluckhohn, adapting to the Cold War, was active in anti-communist Republican Party circles. He served as a Department of State consultant and directed the Committee to End Aid to the Soviet Enemy [CEASE]. Shachtman has extensive comment on how liberal intellectuals often retreated from any substantive engagement with the political degeneration of Soviet socialism as the revelations of the Moscow Trials exposed Stalinism. See Max Shachtman, "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 282–290, Oral History Research Office, No. 488, Columbia University, New York, New York.

ciliatory toward such gentlemen and ladies," Trotsky was tiring of those who claimed to be "neither for Trotsky nor for Stalin, we are only for the truth," seeing this as a "transitory" political posture. As the liberals "try to eternalize their position as super-arbiters above both sides," Trotsky stressed to ACDLT activist Harold Isaacs the necessity of preparing "the minds of the workers" for the choice before them. But he preferred, for the moment, to leave decision-making to the New York comrades. Meanwhile, the Committee continued to mobilize with the active participation of Norman Thomas, John Dewey, Suzanne LaFollette, Louis Adamic, Louis Hacker, James T. Farrell, Sidney Hook, James Rorty, Paul F. Brissenden, Benjamin Stolberg, Max Eastman, Edmund Wilson and, of course, the longstanding team of the Trotskyist Workers Party entryists inside the Socialist Party.²¹

At social gatherings of the New York publishing and intellectual elite, Trotskyist sympathizer James T. Farrell button-holed aspiring writers like Mary McCarthy, asking bluntly if they believed Trotsky had a right to a hearing. When McCarthy declared that he did, she soon found her name on the burgeoning masthead of the *News Bulletin* of the ACDLT, even though she had signed nothing and committed herself only in a casual conversation at a cocktail party. She was initially inclined to ask the Committee to remove her seeming endorsement, but decided instead to find out more about Trotsky and his ordeal. She was then subject to pressure from the Communist Party. It orchestrated a phone campaign targeting those it labeled "tools of reaction." McCarthy resisted the bludgeoning. To her, "the Party wheeling its forces into ... disciplined action" was repugnant. McCarthy stood up to this crude intimidation. Many did not, and "one by one the prominent literary figures disappeared from the Trotsky Committee's letterhead."

The *Nation*, the *New Republic*, and the *New York Times* published an open letter (signed by literary powerhouses Theodore Dreiser, Lillian Hellman, Corliss Lamont, and Granville Hicks) warning liberals that Trotsky's request for a hearing was "a sham." An unmistakable message was being delivered: liberal people should not interfere in the domestic affairs of the Soviet Union. Louis Adamic, whose name, like McCarthy's, had been added to Committee circulars in a cavalier manner, also thought of immediately withdrawing his support. But he balked at calls by "well-meaning friends of the Soviet Union" to "Resign! Resign!" Particularly galling were the not-so-subtle hints that persisting in affiliation to the Trotsky Defense Committee could mean that Adamic's books might

21 Harold Isaacs to Trotsky, 20 February 1937; Trotsky to Isaacs, 24 February 1937; Isaacs to Trotsky, 27 February 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: 9–28 February 1937, PRL; "Trotsky Explains to Kirchwey," *Socialist Appeal*, 26 March 1938.

not be translated into Russian, and that he could well run into brick-walls if he ever wanted to secure a visa giving him entry to the Soviet Union. Adamic refused to bend and stuck with the Committee even though he regarded those running it as “obviously Trotskyites ... who believed in Trotsky’s conspiratorial-revolutionary ideas.”²² The derogatory label “Trotskyite” was, in Malcolm Cowley’s words, “not so much a name as an exorcism.”²³

The Committee soldiered on, but not without internal frictions. Solow and Elliott Cohen, increasingly hostile to Felix Morrow, apparently blocked his appointment as Secretary of the Trotsky Defense committee. The more congenial George Novack – Diana Trilling described him as the “softest-mannered” among a *Menorah Journal* circle – was assigned the task. Novack was the central figure in the original Trotsky asylum committee, he had contacts in the publishing industry, and was well integrated into the Trotskyist “Club” now functioning inside the Socialist Party. All of this made him well suited to head up the new campaign. Novack and Morrow in fact worked as a dedicated team, nurturing the development of similar committees in France and England, with the hope that an international Commission of Inquiry could be established. They were also active inside the Socialist Party, connecting with Militants and others, including Party leader Norman Thomas, promoting the need to defend Trotsky. The first New York mass meeting of the ACDTL at the Center Hotel on 18 December 1936 was a major success, with 3,000 in attendance, and many more turned away. \$1000 was raised. Thomas headed a speakers’ list that included Joseph Schlossberg of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, as well as Shachtman, Farrell, and LaFollette. Felix Morrow told Cannon that the meeting was “a great turning point in our road out of isolation” and that Thomas was cooperating “amazingly well.”²⁴

It was still something of an uphill battle inside the SP. When Novack, Shachtman, and James Burnham went to a Philadelphia meeting of the Party’s National Executive Committee [NEC] to seek endorsement for the Trotsky Defense

22 The above paragraphs draw on Doris Grumbach, *The Company She Kept* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1967), 63; Carol Brightman, *Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and the World* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1992), 122–135; Wald, *James T. Farrell*, 62, 64–65.

23 Malcolm Cowley, *And I Worked at the Writer’s Trade: Chapters of Literary History, 1918–1978* (New York: Viking, 1978), 149.

24 Trilling, *Beginning of the Journey*, 186; Wald, *James T. Farrell*, 62–63; Leaflet, American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky, “The First New York Meeting on the Moscow Trials,” 18 December 1936; Abern to Glotzer, 1 December 1936; Unsigned to Charles Curtiss, 21 December 1936 (from Walter Goldwater Papers); and Felix Morrow to Cannon, 28 December 1936, Chrono Files, Summer 1935/November – December 1936, Folder WP: 1–14 December 1936 & Folder WP: 15–31 December 1936, PRL.

Committee, they were left to cool their heels in an anteroom “for almost an entire day.” Once graced with an audience, the Trotskyist emissaries confronted first-hand the reluctance of a section of the Socialist’s NEC to either call for Trotsky’s asylum or be involved in any official body to investigate the evidence and allegations presented in the Moscow Trials. While some SPers bowed to the pressure of the Communist Party and wanted to steer clear of the Trotsky Defense Committee, other left-wingers, such as Chicago’s Francis Heisler and *Socialist Appeal* editor Al Goldman, were openly supportive and highly critical of the Moscow judicial frame-up.

Cannon used the pages of *Labor Action* in California to herald the formation of the Committee to Defend Leon Trotsky and publicize and report on large public meetings featuring speakers such as Max Eastman, James T. Farrell, and Max Shachtman. “One man’s blood cannot hide the shame of the Soviet Bureaucracy or kill the Revolutionary Socialist movement that is older – and newer – than either Trotsky or Stalin,” editorialized Cannon. “That movement cannot be assassinated inside or outside of the Soviet Union. The bureaucrats of the world have always used terror to damn the tide of history. The bureaucrats fall – history rolls on.” Norman Thomas provided a preface to Friedrich Adler’s (long-time Secretary of the Labor and Socialist International) influential pamphlet, *The Witchcraft Trial in Moscow*, published by the Trotskyist Pioneer Press in January 1937. The SP leader noted that “those interested in justice for Trotsky are by no means all ‘Trotskyists.’” Thomas then denounced the Moscow Trials as “a betrayal of Socialism,” which was true enough, adding that the unfolding persecution was “a blot upon a great record of achievement in Soviet Russia” which seemed to undercut Thomas’s first statement of categorical repudiation with understatement. Nonetheless, connections established inside the Socialist Party were helping facilitate the work of the Trotsky Defense Committee, even as the Trotskyists themselves carried most of the load and took the lead in pointing to Stalinist repression as a destructive assault on the historical accomplishments of the Russian Revolution.²⁵

25 Wald, *James T. Farrell*, 62–63; George Novack, “Max Shachtman: A Political Portrait,” *International Socialist Review*, 34 (February 1973), 29; Novack, “How Trotsky Defense Committee was Organized,” 40; “Let Us Know the Facts: Statement by Leon Trotsky in Reply to the Charges Made Against Him by the Tass Bureau,” and “Editorial Statement,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (September 1936), 10–11; Max Shachtman, “The Moscow Trial,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (1 October 1936), “An Interview with Leon Trotsky on the Recent Moscow Trial,” and Theodore Dan, “The Trials and Executions in Moscow: Eliminating the Left Opposition,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (1 October 1936), 1–6; “Communist Party and Political Asylum,” *Socialist Appeal*, 3 (January 1937), 1–6; “The LSI and the Moscow Trial,” *Labor Action*, 28 November 1936; “Noted Publicists Form Committee to Defend Trotsky,” *Labor Action*, 5 December

Within the Defense Committee there were tensions between its two core streams of activists. On the one hand, Trotskyists such as Novack, Morrow, Martin Abern, and Pearl Kluger were clearly pivotal players in the Committee, and it was this contingent that was responsible for taking on much of the organizational work, including being productively in touch with Trotsky himself. On the other hand, Solow and other intellectuals who had distanced themselves from Trotskyists such as Novack and Morrow because of the entryist liquidation of the NPLD also contributed mightily to the Committee's activity, corresponding (as did Novack and Morrow) with European supporters like Pierre Naville, cultivating relations with sympathetic writers and political prisoners, beating the bushes for funds.²⁶

Solow managed to convince Margaret DeSilver to donate \$5000 to Trotsky's defense. A patrician New Yorker of Quaker background, and a pillar of the city's artistic and literary milieu, DeSilver was a lifelong supporter of civil liberties, women's rights, and social justice issues. She was Carlo Tresca's lover and patron, and a committed anti-fascist. A genuine liberal tolerant of dissent and willing to buck the trend, so pronounced among the American intelligentsia, of prostrating themselves before the malicious misrepresentations of Trotsky emanating from the Moscow Trials, DeSilver questioned the absurd and cynical justifications for the liquidation of many of Lenin's closest collaborators that were being put forward by the Communist Party.²⁷ Like DeSilver, John Dewey condemned the "systematic and organized effort made to prevent the investigation" into the veracity of the claims made against Trotsky in 1936–37.

Dewey and DeSilver, however, were unusual. Philip Rahv later claimed that the Stalinist campaign against Trotsky, culminating in his assassination by a Stalinist agent in 1940, "scarcely caused a ripple of interest among intellectu-

1936; Editorial, *Labor Action*, 5 December 1936; Glen Trimble, "The Story of the Moscow Trial," *Labor Action*, 19 December 1936; "25,000 [sic] at New York Meeting Support Asylum for Trotsky," "They Want to Kill Trotsky," and "Trotsky is Deported to Mexico," *Labor Action*, 2 January 1937; Francis Heisler, "The First Moscow Trials" Why? (Chicago: Socialist Party, 1937); Norman Thomas, "Preface," Adler, *Witchcraft Trial in Moscow*, 3. For a summary of Stalinist attack on Trotsky's right to asylum, which repudiated fundamental and longstanding Marxist positions on the democratic rights of persecuted individuals, see "Communist Party and Political Asylum," *Socialist Appeal*, 3 (January 1937), 1–2.

26 Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 130–132; Novack, "How Trotsky Defense Committee Was Organized," 38–43.

27 Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 131; Claire DeSilver, "The Angel in the Story," *New York Review of Books*, 6 June 1996. Dorothy Gallagher, *All the Right Enemies: The Life and Murder of Carlo Tresca* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 1988) and Nunzio Pernicone, *Carlo Tresca: Portrait of a Rebel* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2010) contain much on the DeSilver-Tresca relationship.

als of the American left.” Respecting power, these supposed brokers of ideas were generally of the view that Trotsky was a marginal figure at best. In Rahv’s words, the intelligentsia “attached their loyalty to the Soviet Union and in no sense to Marxism.” For Rahv, the radicalization of the 1930s was essentially “controlled and manipulated by the Stalinist Party machine ... a period of ideological vulgarity and opportunism, of double-think and power worship, sustained throughout by a mean and crude and unthinking kind of secular religiosity.” The Trotsky Defense Committee did rally significant intellectual support by May 1937, including Dewey, Farrell, McCarthy, Hook, Tresca, Adamic, Eastman, Dwight Macdonald, John Dos Passos, Charles Erskine Scott Wood, Charles Yale Harrison, Gaetano Salvemini, and Tom Tippet. But the cast of opponents was larger and more illustrious, led by Dresier, Hellman, and Lamont, and including figures such as Paul M. Sweezy, Lillian D. Wald, Ring Lardner, Jr., Katherine Lumpkin, Max Lerner, Rockwell Kent, Henry Roth, Art Young, Malcolm Cowley, Heywood Broun, and Robert S. Lynd. As Rahv commented in the *Partisan Review* in 1938, the public outcry against the Trotsky Defense Committee amounted to “the treason of the intellectuals”:

Moscow, the capital of revolution, acclaimed by the oppressed of all nations. The acclaim is turning to revulsion, but many still cling to their faith – perhaps out of desperate need for some kind of certainty ... [I]t is not only the old Bolsheviks who are on trial – we, too, all of us, are in the prisoner’s dock. ... The trials are juridical metaphors of counter-revolution. ... In the Soviet Union the tragic is still in its embryonic phase; the State is barren, and to cure itself it practices exorcisms and conjures up spirits. Pharmako-Trotsky is cast out into the wilderness, while the people and the government unite in a death-celebration.

For Rahv, the Moscow frame-ups were “trials of the mind and of the human spirit,” an international court in which American intellectuals themselves were too often guilty of being outright defenders of Stalinist lies or silent in the face of brutalizing coercion.²⁸

28 John Dewey, “*Truth is on the March*”: *Report and Remarks on the Trotsky Hearings in Mexico* (New York: American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky, 1937), 11; Philip Rahv, “The Great Outsider,” *New York Review of Books*, 23 January 1964; Rahv, “Trials of the Mind,” *Partisan Review*, 4 (April 1938), 3–11. On the intellectual opposition to the Trotsky Defense Committee see Mary McCarthy, *On the Contrary* (London: Heinemann, 1962), 21–23; Brightman, *Writing Dangerously*, 132, 136–137; David Caute, *The Fellow-Travelers: A Postscript to the Enlightenment* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 119–126; Eugene

4 Dancing with Dewey

From the time that Trotsky and Natalia disembarked the Norwegian freighter *Ruth*, and moved into Frida Kahlo's "blue house" in the Mexico City suburb of Coyoacan, they were preoccupied with the well-being of their sons (Leon Sedov in France and Sergei Sedov in the Soviet Union). Given the deluge of slander emanating from Moscow, they feared for their children's lives. Trotsky telegraphed John Dewey, Norman Thomas, and the American Defense Committee on 11 January 1937, putting himself and what documentation he could secure at the service of an "impartial investigation" into the allegations against him. "Concealment of facts, silence, downright protection of falsification, and forgery never served advance of peoples," he concluded, signing off, "Humanity attains liberation only on the road of truth."²⁹

Then followed a crescendo of communications/bulletins/interviews/speeches to and with the Mexican press, the *New York Daily Herald*, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, the *Manchester Guardian*, the League of Nations, *Pravda*, the *New York Times*, newsreels, and the *News Bulletin* of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky, among others.³⁰ Trotsky declared that he was "prepared to go before any free and impartial jury, any preliminary commission of inquiry whatsoever, to demonstrate with irrefutable facts, letters, documents, and witnesses that the Moscow 'Trotskyist' trial is a terrible falsification and that the real culprits are not the accused but the accusers."³¹

Lyons, *The Red Decade: The Stalinist Penetration of America* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941), 252–265, which, for all of its lurid anti-communism, has the virtue of listing all 88 signatories to the *Soviet Russia Today*, March 1937 call for refusing the Trotsky Defense Committee any support. Even the Trotsky Defense Committee supporter, V.F. Calverton, conducting a symposium on Trotsky's "guilt" in his *Modern Monthly*, could only marshal a split decision: three guilty votes alongside six condemning the "frame-up" and three ballots cast on the side of indecision and confusion. See "Is Trotsky Guilty: A Symposium," *Modern Monthly*, 10 (March 1937), 5–8, the jury of 12 consisting of John Chamberlain, Theodore Dreiser, Jerome Davis, Clifton Fadiman, Henry Hazlitt, John Hayes Holmes, Leo Huberman, Henry Goddard Leach, Robert Morss Lovett, Ludwig Lore, A.J. Muste, and Burton Rascoe. Cited in Constance Ashton Myers, *The Prophet's Army: Trotskyists in America, 1928–1941* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1977), 136.

29 Leon Trotsky to Dewey, Thomas, and American Committee Defense Leon Trotsky, 11 January 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 88.

30 As a broad sample only see the documents in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, esp. 88–225.

31 Trotsky, "The New Trial: An Unmistakable Sign of Sharp Political Crisis in the USSR," 22 January 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 130. For an account of Trotsky's arrival see van Heijenoort, *With Trotsky in Exile*, 104–106.

Amid the flood of “confessions” and the ongoing “*extermination of the Opposition*,” Trotsky was desperate to put the truth before the world, pressing for the creation of “an American, a European, and subsequently an *international commission of inquiry* composed of people who incontestably enjoy authority and public confidence.” He pledged to furnish “all my files, thousands of personal and open letters in which the development of my *thought* and my action is reflected day by day, without any gaps.”³² The ACDLT organized mass Trotsky defense meetings in various locales, including Boston and Chicago, drawing crowds that approached 500. Chicago’s rally, according to Glotzer, was considered by some on the left to have been “the greatest meeting in all history.”³³

On 9 February 1937, approximately 6,500 gathered at New York City’s Hippodrome to hear a speech by Trotsky on the Moscow Trials, transmitted from Mexico. Technical difficulties prevented the broadcast (it was rumored that either Stalinists or the United States political police cut telephone wires in Mexico), but Max Shachtman read Trotsky’s prepared text. Harold Isaacs described the scene to Trotsky:

The night of the Hippodrome meeting was a hectic and nerve-wracking affair for everyone. When we could at last relax, we all realized how profound a revelation it was that there is an immense straining after the truth behind all this nightmare. The mood and temper of that audience was unlike any of our comrades have ever seen or known. After waiting an hour to hear you, they sat deathly still while Shachtman read. They had not come automatically to cheer or jeer, but to hear and learn. That was the most remarkable feature of a remarkable and impressive meeting. When at the end the resolution was put to a vote, there was a thunder of AYE and only a few scattered nays by **only a few** of the many Stalinists in the audience. The latter have been severely shaken by the succession of trials and have had to extend themselves to the most hysterical lengths to convince their own people.

32 Trotsky, “Speech for a Newsreel,” 30 January 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 179.

33 Albert Glotzer to James Burnham, 20 January 1937; Glotzer to Vincent Dunne, 11 February 1937; August Mosore (?) to Arne Swabeck, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: 20–31 January 1937 & Folder WP: 9–28 February 1937, from Walter Goldwater Papers, PRL; Alan Wald, *The Revolutionary Imagination: The Poetry and Politics of John Wheelwright and Sherry Mangan* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 155.

Trotsky's remarks, which were later published as *I Stake My Life!* (1937), concluded with a ringing declaration of the importance of repudiating the lies concocted by the Moscow prosecutor in the name of socialism: "The Moscow trials are a signal. Woe to them who do not heed! ... The Moscow trails are prepared under the banner of socialism. We will not concede this banner to the masters of falsehood! ... The struggle which is in the offing transcends by far the importance of individuals, factions, and parties. It is the struggle for the future of mankind!"³⁴

With the *News Bulletin* of the ACDLT calling "For An Impartial Commission of Inquiry!" Cannon used the pages of his west coast paper, *Labor Action*, to publicize the nature of the Moscow frame-ups and promote the necessity of a thorough investigation, denouncing Stalin and his henchmen who were "Digging the Grave of the Russian Revolution." As the Socialist Party's left wing gathered in Chicago under the auspices of the Appeal Institute, Trotsky pressed the meeting to endorse the creation of a Commission of Inquiry. He offered himself up to the Stalinist secret police should there be any question of his culpability: "If this commission decides that I am directly or indirectly guilty, even if only in an infinitesimal degree, of the monstrous crimes which Stalin tries to impute to me, I will deliver myself voluntarily into the hands of the GPU."³⁵

Trotsky perhaps underestimated the difficulties Novack and others in the SP Trotskyist "Club" faced in mobilizing support for asylum and an impartial Commission of Inquiry. They did constitute the Committee of Inquiry, but they confronted opposition along the way. In districts like New England, rightist currents in the SP argued that ideas like the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat, armed

34 Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 136 mistakenly states Novack read Trotsky's speech. The Hippodrome meeting had been carefully planned: Shachtman to Trotsky, 1 February 1937; Isaacs to Trotsky, 2 February 1937 (from Walter Goldwater Papers); Burnham to Glotzer, 4 February 1937, Chrono File, January – December 1937, Folder WP: 1–9 February 1937, PRL. See also Isaacs to Trotsky, 20 February 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, in Folder WP: 9–28 February 1937, from Trotsky Papers, Harvard, PRL; Leon Trotsky, *I Stake My Life! Trotsky's Address to the N.Y. Hippodrome Meeting* (New York: Pioneer, 1937); van Heijenoot, *With Trotsky in Exile*, 108.

35 "For An Impartial Commission of Inquiry!," *News Bulletin of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky*, 2 (27 January 1937), 1; "Trotsky Telegram Repeats Challenge," *Labor Action*, 27 February 1937; "Mexican Labor Stands for the Right of Asylum," *Labor Action*, 9 January 1937; "Defense Body Asks Delay of Radek-Pyatakoff Trial," *Labor Action*, 16 January 1937; "Roster of Defendants in Latest Moscow 'Trial,'" *Labor Action*, 30 January 1937; "Digging the Grave of the Russian Revolution," *Labor Action*, 30 January 1937; Albert Goldman, "Toward Socialist Clarity," *Socialist Appeal*, 3 (February 1937), 26–27; "Resolution Adopted on the Moscow Trials," *Socialist Appeal*, 3 (March 1937), 44.

struggle, etc.," commonly promoted by leftists in the Young People's Socialist League, were "refuted by the Moscow Trials. Since the Russian Revolution was once 'based on intolerance,' it must necessarily 'exist on intolerance'."³⁶

Trotsky was, moreover, not fully aware of all disagreements among his supporters involved in building a defense committee and setting up a formal inquiry into the Moscow Trials and their allegations. In January 1937 he wrote to Cannon: "Shachtman gave me only a very general picture of the successes and mentioned in only a few words certain differences that have arisen."³⁷ But he was well aware that in Europe there was even less likelihood of success, given the influence of Stalinism on leftist intellectuals such as André Malraux, and even the more independent-minded André Gide. Trotsky came to accept that there was "small hope that such an initiative [a tribunal or inquiry]" would be forthcoming in France. By mid-March 1937, Trotsky was instructing Pierre Naville to subordinate any Committee work done in the name of Trotsky's defense and the establishment of a commission of investigation into the Moscow Trials to the leading core of this initiative in New York.³⁸ Trotsky concluded that, "New York is now the center of the movement for a review of the Moscow trials, which is, be it said in passing, the only way of preventing new judicial assassinations."³⁹

Within a matter of days of settling in to his Mexican quarters, Trotsky sought to discuss matters face-to-face with Cannon, but he was not permitted to travel to the United States, nor was it possible for Cannon to make the trip south to Mexico.⁴⁰ Novack conceded that "very little was done to organize an International Commission of Inquiry, even after the second Moscow Trial of Piatakov, Radek and others January 23–30, 1937."⁴¹ Impatient with the lack of progress on this front by February 1937, Trotsky pressed Cannon to return to New York from

36 Morose (?) to Swabeck, 14 February 1937, Chrono File, January – February 1937, Folder WP: 9–28 February 1937, from Walter Goldwater Papers, PRL.

37 Trotsky to Cannon, 20 January 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 109.

38 Leon Trotsky, "A Press Statement on Andre Malraux," 8 March 1937; "Deposition on the Theft of Archives," 10 March 1937; "Some Concrete Questions for Mr. Malraux," 13 March 1937; Trotsky to Naville, 17 March 1937, all in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 224–225, 232, 234–236, 250–251. Evidence of disappointment in European developments is also in Isaacs to Trotsky, 27 February 1937; Trotsky to Isaacs, 3 March 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: 9–28 February 1937, from Trotsky Papers, Harvard, PRL.

39 Trotsky, "A Press Statement on Andre Malraux," 8 March 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 224. See also Shachtman, "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 282–296.

40 Trotsky to Cannon, 20 January 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 108–109; Cannon to Trotsky, 3 March 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: March 1937, from Trotsky Papers, Harvard, PRL.

41 Novack, "How Trotsky Defense Committee Was Organized," 40.

California, trusting that he could influence developments in positive ways, expressing concern with Novack's handling of the Trotsky Defense Committee, which he confided filled him with "great apprehension." Trotsky was decidedly unhappy with the failure of the Committee to secure depositions of American supporters who had visited him in Norway, their testimonies being proofs that would counter some of the lies propagated in the Communist Party's *Daily Worker*. Dismayed at the lackadaisical work of the Committee, Trotsky complained to Harold Isaacs in sharp words: "It is absolutely incomprehensible why the comrades have not done these things. ... Nothing was done. What criminal thoughtlessness!"⁴²

Similar communications continued into mid-March. Trotsky was irritated by the accommodations the Defense Committee was prepared to make to liberals and social democrats. He was particularly irked by the solicitous attitude taken to the British laborite, Fenner Brockway, leader of the centrist British Independent Labour Party. Brockway's answer to the campaign to establish a Commission of Inquiry was that such an investigation would be impermissible because it would arouse "prejudice in Russia and in Communist circles." In contrast, Brockway proposed that a jury of four or five objective, analytical social democrats, led by himself, might judiciously assess "the role of Trotskyism in the working-class movement." Novack, on behalf of the Committee, accepted Brockway's proposals of moderate socialists as "excellent" prospective members of an inquiry, and failed to decisively challenge the British gadfly's understanding of the work of the tribunal. Trotsky was incensed. He tore a strip off the New York comrade, characterizing his actions as "absolutely unacceptable." Troubled by Committee member John Dewey's pandering to liberal organs like the *Nation* and vacillating as to his involvement in any full-scale inquiry, Trotsky was also tiring of Norman Thomas's claims that "he is too exposed to the fire of the Stalinists to participate in the commission," even though Thomas was well-known as "my irreconcilable adversary." Fed up with the abstentionism of certain American "progressives" like Charles Beard, Trotsky wrote to Suzanne LaFollette on 15 March 1937. His main point was that delay and backtracking vis-à-vis the creation of a formal tribunal had opened the door to Stalinist intrigue and intervention. Already, in Mexico, Comintern agents were at work to create a kind of counter-commission of inquiry; Malraux had been dispatched to New York to curry favor with the increasingly fellow-traveling intelligentsia; and publications like the *Nation* and the *New Republic* were fall-

42 Trotsky to Harold Isaacs, 20 February 1937; Trotsky to Cannon, 9 March 1937, both in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936-1937]*, 210-211, 226-227.

ing in line. As time was frittered away in launching the Commission of Inquiry, ground was being lost to the adversary.

Trotsky longed for more direct contact with Cannon, and telegraphed San Francisco: "Sent you two letters, but no answer. Very disquieting." Cannon was not directly involved in the operation of the New York-based Committee. Burdened by other responsibilities and concerns, Cannon was addressing tactical problems arising from the entry and politically consolidating the growing SP Left-wing. He was preparing for Party conventions, while also trying to pursue opportunities for mass work in west coast trade unions and overseeing the publication of *Labor Action*. He could only offer Trotsky his assurances that things were going well, and that, "I really think now we are going to come out on top." Pressured by Felix Morrow to write directly to Trotsky, Cannon had Rose Karsner communicate that things were "taking place with speed and decisiveness," adding, "I beg you to excuse me from the necessity of writing you." Trotsky persisted, writing to Cannon and Shachtman at the end of March, expressing yet again his trepidation that foot-dragging around the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry reflected an unwarranted emphasis on the support of unstable liberals, some of whom were Communist Party fellow travelers. He was incredulous that the Trotskyists in the ACDLT proposed Waldo Frank as a candidate for inclusion in the tribunal's panel when he was clearly little more than "Browder's lieutenant." Insisting that it would be the Commission's work – its dissemination of documents, testimonies, and depositions – that would ultimately bring the public to grasp the truth about the Moscow Trials, Trotsky urged Cannon and Shachtman to do their utmost to constitute a Commission of Inquiry immediately. It could be a "modest body of three or five, solid, honest workers, with a couple of honest and competent intellectuals," and the conclusions of the empirical work done by this investigative body would "influence the hesitating liberals, the sociologists, the lawyers and the rabbis a thousand times more than permanent adaptation to the liberals from our side. Have you those three solid workers or not?" Dismayed that only 10,000 copies of his pamphlet, *I Stake My Life!*, had been sold, Trotsky urged concentration "on mass work and not personal maneuvers with the liberals."⁴³

43 The above two paragraphs draw on "Fenner Brockway, Pritt No. 2," 6 March 1937; Trotsky to George Novack, 9 March 1937; Trotsky to LaFollette, 15 March 1937; Trotsky telegram to San Francisco, 22 March 1937; Trotsky to Cannon, 15 March 1937; Trotsky to Comrades in the Committee, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 221–223, 228–229, 237–238, 252–255; Cannon/RK to Trotsky, 22 March 1937, from Leon Trotsky Papers, Harvard University and Trotsky to Cannon and Shachtman, 29 March 1937, from Glotzer Papers, in Chrono-

As long as Cannon was in California, however, his ability to work on Trotsky's defense was largely restricted to "extending a circle of friends in Hollywood who had become interested in Trotskyism as a result of the Moscow frame-up trials." Cannon cultivated relations with screen writers and others, promoting the ACDLT among them. He read some of the works of the playwright Sidney Howard, a Santa Monica supporter of the Committee, and informed Joe Carter in May 1937 that he was "working on the Hollywood angle," spending "quite a lot of time on it." Although Stalinism had "all the 'radicals' pretty well corralled here," and Hollywood was "a very hard nut to crack," Cannon looked forward to following up leads provided by Felix Morrow and attending "little meetings" with writers. Less comfortable in such social settings than he was in more proletarian environments, Cannon nevertheless pitched in to do what he could, reporting that, "I have been putting in a lot of time since I came here in the effort to create a sympathetic nucleus of people connected with the film industry." Cannon wrote that he really hoped "to get some concrete results before I finish," but frustration was obviously setting in: "I don't think I ever in my life put in so much time and effort in this kind of work."⁴⁴

File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: March 1937 & Folder WP: May 1937 (misfiled), PRL. For the eventual critique of Brockway see "Committee Raps New Substitute Inquiries," *News Bulletin of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky*, 5 (16 March 1937), 1–2. Waldo Frank, a fellow-traveling intellectual throughout the 1930s fell afoul of Browder when he expressed mild concern about the Moscow Trials, but he managed to do so while accepting many of the premises and outcomes of the trials and, later, condemning the "partisanship" of the Dewey Commission. See, for a brief account, Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 360–361.

- 44 Frank Lovell in Les Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him: By Thirty-Three Comrades, Friends, and Relatives* (New York: Pathfinder, 1976), 131–132; Cannon to Carter, 10 May 1937, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Cannon to Joe [Hansen/Carter?], 26 May 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: May 1937, from Trotsky Papers, Harvard & JPC Papers, Reel 4, PRL. Shachtman later confirmed how weak support for the Trotsky Defense Committee in Hollywood was, "the movie colony ... [being] virtually inundated by Stalinist radicalism." At a meeting that Cannon no doubt helped to set up, Shachtman spoke on the Moscow Trials. "Only a score of the Hollywood colony appeared ... almost all Europeans of distinction and of political sophistication acquired in their sympathetic contact with European radical and liberal movements." Max Shachtman, "Radicalism in the Thirties: The Trotskyist View," in Rita James Simon, *As We Saw The Thirties: Essays on Social and Political Movements of a Decade* (Urbana, Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 41. In 1937 a young Myra Tanner [Weiss] was living in Los Angeles and dating the son of Greta Garbo's screenwriter. Garbo, undoubtedly an anti-fascist, was not known for taking public political stands, but she was amused by the vivacious and precocious Trotskyist. Garbo made sure Myra was invited to Hollywood parties, where it was certain that Tanner would cross swords with the film industry crowd, dominated as it was by "progressive" German

It was left to Shachtman to communicate with the irate Trotsky. Conceding that mistakes had been made, Shachtman cited the “first handling of the Brockway proposal,” where “a tendency to lean backwards” and “a certain liberal timidity and over-tactfulness” were evident. But on balance, Shachtman defended the adaptation to liberalism, which he defined as pressing for Trotsky’s right to a hearing and a presumption of innocence until evidence was actually presented, as necessary to the Committee’s success, arguing that:

The evidence that this formal approach, ‘liberal’ in a certain sense, has been effective, is that after their first avalanche of abuse, the Stalinists have been forced to resort to their liberal agencies to suggest their own ‘impartial’ enquiries. The Stalinist attempt to discredit the Committee as ‘Trotskyist’ in the political sense, failed to convince intelligent public opinion. In that lay the strength of the Committee, one of the most impressive mustered for a political cause celebre in recent years. In the face of the widely diffused sentimental loyalty to the Soviet Union, the trials and our work effected the first great cleavage of the liberal and cultural front, which the Stalinists had grown accustomed to regard as their monopoly. The voice of Moscow is no longer considered the voice of the Last Judgment. For the American Committee to develop the ‘full political line’ would obviously be outside of its province; that belongs to the Fourth International inside the Socialist Party. But it is no exaggeration to state that, with all its defects, a certain inevitable tendency at times to get bogged in routine and administration and to lose sight of the forest for the trees (all of course nascent and dangerous symptoms of opportunism, if not checked) the American Committee was for a long time our sole channel for independent activity among the masses. Both from the viewpoint of what was gained in the cracking of the liberal front, and what has been achieved in furthering our political interests in the Socialist Party, the Committee has a credible record.

Shachtman thus struggled to educate Trotsky about how difficult it was to break the cultural front that exercised such influence in the United States.⁴⁵ And he was no doubt right that a certain appeal to liberal thought and personnel was paying dividends in the Committee’s broad, non-partisan work. Yet Shacht-

émigrés, the bulk of whom were Stalinists. See “Life in Cannon’s SWP: A Conversation with Myra,” 1977: *Journal of the International Bolshevik Tendency*, 20 (1998).

45 On this cultural front see the broad discussion in Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996).

man also overreached in many ways, and his suggestion that the Committee was “the sole channel for independent activity among the masses” obviously understated Cannon’s west coast agitations among maritime workers, as well as other developments that will be discussed later in this chapter. It was another instance of Shachtman’s somewhat myopic focus on goings on in New York City. While adapting to centrists inside the Socialist Party, who he imagined were moving the SP in revolutionary directions, Shachtman had similarly unrealistic hopes for the liberals on the Committee, with which he, Novack, and other Trotskyists cultivated relations. Rightly praising their resolve in withstanding a “terrific barrage of cajolery and intimidation,” Shachtman wrongly regarded such supporters of Trotsky’s defense as coming, through their activity in the Committee, to “regard themselves as more or less ‘Trotskyist.’” He described to Trotsky a core group of LaFollette, Adamic, Farrell, and Stolberg as loyal to the Trotskyist “Club” inside the SP, as “‘trotskyist’ liberals if we may be excused for this barbarous conjunction.” Of this group, however, only James T. Farrell could be described as politically sympathetic to Trotskyism at the time and all of these figures would eventually, and some within a very short time span, express hostility towards their revolutionary co-workers in the Trotsky Defense Committee and/or develop adversarial relations with them. Adamic, ironically, had a far more acute understanding of the liberals on the Trotsky Defense Committee than did Shachtman. He understood that while Stolberg, LaFollette and others might admire “some part of [Trotsky’s] mind or past,” they had little attraction to “his basic philosophy and future aims”; they were “‘anti-Stalinist’ without being Trotskyite.”⁴⁶

Trotsky, in any case, was not hoodwinked by Shachtman’s willingness to amalgamate political incompatibles. He undoubtedly saw it as yet another instance of Shachtman’s supple capacity for adaptation, notwithstanding the extent to which Trotsky himself understood and appreciated the necessity of liberal support for the Commission of Inquiry, and the ways in which it kept publicly important figures like Norman Thomas aligned with the ACDLT. Shachtman closed his communication with an apology for falling behind in the distribution of Trotsky’s *I Stake My Life!* He also confessed that little pro-

46 Louis Adamic, *My America* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938), 85. Farrell overstated LaFollette’s “falling heavily for the Trotskyists,” and was, for all his political sympathies, somewhat self-centered in his understandings of his own role and importance, feeling that he should have a place on any preliminary Commission of Inquiry. He also reacted negatively to what he considered the “idolatry of Trotsky on the part of the Trotskyites,” which he described as “so thick that it could be cut with a knife.” See Wald, *James T. Farrell*, 66–68.

gress had been made in the critically important task of securing support from trade union militants, which Trotsky considered essential to the defense work. Aggrieved by the Committee's slowness at getting the inquiry into the Moscow Trials up and running, Trotsky informed Shachtman curtly on 15 March 1937: "I must say to you that the seriousness and energy of our comrades in this matter in the next days is for me the *sine qua non* for our further collaboration."⁴⁷

Novack later suggested that Trotsky's March 1937 demand that the Committee launch a formal tribunal investigating the allegations presented during the Moscow Trials pushed his followers into action. A mass meeting was called for 9 March 1937. Under the auspices of the ACDLT, LaFollette, Novack, and Shachtman were joined on the podium by Carlo Tresca, former Moscow United Press correspondent, Eugene Lyons, and editor of the Lovestoneite *Workers Age*, Bertram D. Wolfe. The group convened under the banner, "Protest the New Moscow Frameup!" The defense organization intensified "efforts to assemble the personnel, raise the finances, and organize a subcommittee to go to Mexico to hear Trotsky's testimony." As this happened, the Communist Party redoubled its attempts to pressure liberals to refuse to participate in any formal investigative hearing, or even to debate the nature and meaning of the Moscow Trials. It went so far as to castigate the Socialist Party for harboring Trotskyists in its midst. A late February 1937 invitation by the Socialist Club of the University of Chicago to the school's Communist Club, proposing a debate over the Moscow Trials, was rebuffed:

In our opinion the Moscow trials are being used by a certain group whose main object is to make progressive people suspicious of the integrity of the Soviet Union – that great source for peace ... We refer, of course, to

47 The above paragraphs draw heavily and quote from Shachtman to Trotsky, [no date/early March 1937?], in Chrono-File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: March 1937 from Glotzer Papers, Box 4, Folder 4, PRL. See also Isaacs to Trotsky, 11 March 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: March 1937, from Trotsky Papers, Harvard, PRL; Trotsky to Shachtman, 15 March 1937; Trotsky to Cannon, Shachtman, Morrow et al., 20 April 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 239, 274. On the pressures mounted by Stalinism against liberal support for the ACDLT and its Commission of Inquiry see "An Open Letter to American Liberals," *Soviet Russian Today* (March 1937), 14–15. Especially prominent were Stalinist Popular Front arguments that the main danger to liberal democracy was fascism and the need for a unified opposition to it which, it was claimed, would be hampered by discussions of Trotsky and the Moscow Trials, which the *New Republic* presented as questions for American liberals "that concern them at second hand." See Editorial, *New Republic*, 17 March 1937; Alfred Kazin, *Starting Out in the Thirties* (Boston: Little Brown, 1965), 85, 137; Cowley, *And I Worked at the Writer's Trade*, 148–152.

followers of Leon Trotsky. ... It was with these considerations in mind that we agreed to debate only under certain conditions, one of which was that the Socialist Club not be represented by Trotskyists. Since the Socialist Club refused to agree to this condition, there could be no debate. ... Communists have always worked for united action on progressive purpose. Trotskyists, whose major premise, like that of Hearst, is opposition to the Communists, have always attempted to disrupt such unity. ... In the name of Socialism, our common objective, and in the name of that united action so necessary for its achievement, we ask the members of the Socialist Club to consider very carefully these facts and to ask themselves whether there may not be some James Cannons on this campus.

Against this kind of imposed marginalization, Trotskyist agitation around the Moscow Trials continued forcefully. In April 1937, Joe Carter reported to Cannon that the first issue of the tabloid *Truth* was hot off the press, with "comrades ... mobilized for street distribution."⁴⁸ Trotsky's organizational and political concerns remained however.

He chastised Solow and others for their administrative paralysis, which threatened to lead the Committee "into an impasse." Arguing that an actual Commission of Inquiry be established immediately, Trotsky suggested that a number of factors – among them Stalinist attack and dilettantism – had led to squandering valuable time in a perfectionist attempt to elaborate a foolproof set of statutes to guide the Committee's work. "Yesterday I learned from Solow that the statutes are a thing in themselves," wrote Trotsky in exasperation on 17 March 1937, "a means of taking up time in the hope that from good statutes an ideal commission will arise. This is a purely formalistic, purely juridical, unpolitical, and un-Marxian conception."⁴⁹

48 Novack, "How Trotsky Defense Committee was Organized," 40; Leaflet, American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky, "Protest the New Moscow Frameup!" 9 March 1937; Carter to Cannon, 14 April 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: April 1937, PRL; Executive Committee, Communist Club to Socialist Club, University of Chicago, 23 February 1937, "General Organizational and Secretarial Correspondence, 1923–1956," Boxes 15–16/Reels 20–21, JPC Papers.

49 Dewey, who conceded at this point that he had not been an active participant in the ACDLT, nonetheless pressed for "A Declaration of Principles," which was drafted, and Solow had been at work on the creation of a set of procedures for the Commission of Inquiry. See "John Dewey Urges Impartial Inquiry Commission" and "A Declaration of Principles," *News Bulletin of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky*, 5 (16 March 1937), 3, where Dewey insisted that it would be possible by a declaration of abstract statutes, to "get the support of public opinion in behalf of the Commission and convince the type of person who should be members of the Commission of our sincerity of purpose

This quest for an ideal Commission, which grew out of the necessity of attracting broad, non-partisan support, had become a politically confused adaptation to a liberal refusal of what Trotsky called “delimitation,” a necessary prerequisite to any coalition with non-revolutionaries. Delimitation, in terms of any bloc or working relationship with liberals, demanded a resolute separation from all “open and perfidious enemies.” This is what the Committee politically failed to do, thwarting an early attempt by Trotsky to address the *Nation*’s backsliding concessions to Stalinism with a brief blunt letter, neglecting to oppose the obfuscations and diversions of Fenner Brockway, and conceding too much to John Dewey, Norman Thomas, and others in their unwillingness to ruffle either liberal or Stalinist feathers. Trotsky was well aware that keeping Dewey on side with the Committee’s work was important. Yet he also stressed that there was a clear need to take Dewey on when he balked at alienating liberal organs like the *Nation*, insisted on abstract principles that highlighted being somehow above *both* the Stalinists and the Trotskyists, or begged off involvement in the actual Commission of Inquiry. In a candid but circumspect letter to Suzanne LaFollette, Trotsky warned of the “utopian” danger of delay, which played into Stalinist hands. Waiting for the creation of an “ideal commission, above all attack and reproach,” would necessarily lead to hesitation at “the threshold of the investigation.” Trotsky pointed out to LaFollette that Norman Thomas’s hand-wringing about Stalinist opposition or Dewey’s concerns about his age limiting the rigorous work he could undertake as part of the Commission should not be the cause of further unwarranted delay. He urged the formation of a preliminary body of three to five commissioners, who could immediately travel to Mexico to interrogate Trotsky and familiarize themselves with evidence as a basis of determining whether a full inquiry was warranted, a kind of transitional demand that practical work begin. To his trusted Trotskyist comrades in New York, Trotsky made the same point, emphasizing that, “A small inquiry commission, even though composed of modest rank-and-file people (if the authoritative persons hesitate), can accomplish some very good work.”

There was thus an organizational imperative to get things moving immediately, as well as a political need to stiffen the tone of Trotskyist delimitation. Trotsky was convinced that the large numbers of workers and others who assembled at the Hippodrome in February 1937 to hear his speech were an

and of the honesty and integrity of the plans of procedure suggested to the Commission, so that it may effectively accomplish its tasks.” Trotsky’s response of 17 March 1937 appears in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 253.

indication that there was a mass base supportive of the Committee/Commission. But the need was to get the Commission started, doing so on a different political foundation.

We have written many things about the Marxist rules of coalition: a) not to lose one's own identity; b) to view the ally as a possible adversary; c) to preserve for oneself the full rights of criticism; d) to supplement the bloc action with independent actions; e) to be ready in favorable circumstances (Hippodrome meeting) to take the full initiative of action when the allies are hesitating.

Trotsky found little of this programmatic orientation at work in the Trotsky Defense Committee in February – March 1937. The old revolutionary was dismayed at the lack of progress. He likened the passivity of his New York comrades (with some hyperbole) to that of “the Chinese Communists after their entrance into the Kuomintang.” Insisting on 17 March 1937 that a Mexican Sub-commission be established in two or three days, Trotsky huffed, “*Mon Dieu*, the matter is not so complicated, if the committee is willing to accomplish its duty.”⁵⁰

At the height of this conflict, Cannon traveled from California to New York. His primary assignment was to join Dunne so that they could confer with Thomas over the rising tide of reactionary opposition to the presence of the Workers Party entryists in the Socialist Party. But Trotsky also urged Cannon to get involved with the flagging work of the Committee and its attempts to establish a Commission of Inquiry. He clearly had confidence in Cannon, and hoped he could effectively counter “the Stalinist cry to give Norman Thomas and others of his kind the possibility of retreat from the inquiry. It would be absolutely childish on our part to cherish illusions about the firmness of such fellow-travelers: a simple liberal can be firmer than a Social Democrat in matters of justice. I am convinced that only a very firm and undeviating attitude (with all the necessary tact, of course, of course, of course) can hinder Norman Thomas from following in Fenner Brockway's footsteps.”⁵¹

Cannon's March 1937 sojourn in New York did much to push forward the work of the Committee, although the private meetings and liquor-fed house parties, hosted by the likes of Suzanne LaFollette, were not the best settings for a delicate balancing of Trotsky's call for tact and political firmness. In this

50 The above paragraphs draw on Trotsky to LaFollette, 15 March 1937; Trotsky to Comrades in the Committee, 17 March 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky* [1936–1937], 237–238, 252–255.

51 Trotsky to Cannon, 9 March 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky* [1936–1937], 226.

March swirl of events, where nights alternated between boozy cocktail soirées and meetings of the Executive Committee of the ACDLT, Cannon's political firmness alienated James T. Farrell, whose sense of himself clearly exceeded his capacity to take a little political ribbing. He regarded Cannon as patronizing when the seasoned revolutionary announced jocularly that he was going to straighten the author out so that he could write with more proletarian feeling. *Partisan Review* editor Philip Rahv gossiped with Farrell about Cannon's tactless boast, apparently driven by drink, that he had met with John Dewey and told the philosopher it was his "moral duty" to participate in the Commission of Inquiry. Farrell was so angry at all of this that he complained to George Novack, commenting that if he were a member of a Trotskyist party he would have a mind to form an opposition against Cannon.⁵² Farrell's relations with Cannon would improve, but by the late 1940s they soured again, with the writer certain that while intellectuals gravitated to the cause of Trotsky in the late 1930s, Cannon's "boorish" behavior contributed to their falling away. He recalled with disdain Joe Hansen's maudlin 1944 rendition of Cannon "snagging" John Dewey. "I went to him and told him what the situation was," Cannon apparently recollected on his way to prison in 1944. "I told him he must do something for justice. I wouldn't let him go until he agreed. ... That was how he came to serve on the Commission. That was how Trotsky was given the opportunity to prove his innocence to the whole world, to prove that he was the best defender of the Soviet Union." Farrell, ultimately unimpressed with Cannon, thought he fought Stalinism with "hypocrisy and self-righteousness."⁵³

How Dewey was convinced to Chair the Preliminary Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made Against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials and lead the small, non-Trotskyist group preparing the Report of the Commission of Inquiry, titled *Not Guilty* (1938), is no doubt complicated. Cannon's role was by no means centrally important, although it should not simply be dismissed. Dewey had been involved with the Trotsky Defense mobilizations since 1936, and by 1937 he was attending Executive Committee meetings. But he was not fully committed to the campaign, and his prize student, Sidney Hook, in the words of Christopher Phelps, "had to reassure his mentor repeatedly of the legitimacy of the project." Approaching 80 in 1937, and preoccupied with the completion of

52 Wald, *James T. Farrell*, 68. What *kind* of opposition would rest on the personalized discontents Farrell was voicing?

53 Farrell to Shachtman, 4 December 1946; Farrell to Novack, 8 March 1947, Roll 21, Reel 3378, Max Shachtman Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter MS Papers]; Joseph Hansen, "How The Trotskyists Went To Jail," *New International*, 5 (February 1944), 45.

his *magnum opus*, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938), Dewey was reluctant to take on the responsibilities associated with an inquiry into the Moscow Trials. Irritated by being drawn into so many political activities, Dewey complained to Hook, "I'm caught in the many-toothed jaw. Can you have mercy on my soul." His family wanted him to have no part in the Commission of Inquiry, and Dewey, a pragmatist and staunch advocate of bourgeois democracy, always harbored oppositions to Trotsky's revolutionary politics, which he dubbed a kind of ideological fanaticism. Still, he had a principled commitment to the right of any individual to an impartial hearing against allegations of the kind Trotsky faced in the mid-to-late 1930s. All of this meant that Dewey's role in the Committee's work was uncertain until decisions began to be made and the creation of the Inquiry took on a certain urgency in March 1937.⁵⁴

Hook, who probably did more to ease Dewey into accepting the onerous job of chairing the 1937 Inquiry than anyone else, was pressed by Morrow and Solow to arrange a meeting between his mentor, Cannon, and Novack. This private meeting has been presented by Hook as entirely counterproductive, but the philosopher's later recollections were not likely to accord the leader of American Trotskyism much leeway. Claiming that Cannon's "outrageous flattery" repelled Dewey, who was "not taken in for a moment by [the] oily ward heeler's charm," Hook insisted that this sycophancy almost "scuttled the matter." Novack's brief allusion to the "interview" he and Cannon had with Dewey did not echo this dismissal. Cannon was doubtless trying to appeal to Dewey's better nature, and even if his pitch was laid on a bit thick, it made sense, given the seriousness of the Moscow Trials allegations and their political and historical import, to invoke the famous philosopher's "democratic faith," commitment to "fair play," and reputation for always standing on the side of "the truth." Cannon pressured Dewey to act out of a moral imperative, and if his pleas were obsequious, they resonated with the old liberal pragmatist's sense of himself and the meaning of his life's work. Edmund Wilson, for instance, remarked in 1937 that, "one of the worst drawbacks of being a Stalinist at the present time is that you have to defend so many falsehoods." Dewey was no Stalinist. Confronted with overt lies, he felt duty bound to oppose their promulgation.

In the end, Hook, Cannon, Novack and others who talked to Dewey about working with the Commission probably had less influence than the Stalinists themselves, whose approach to Dewey extended to bribery (offer of a junket tour to the Soviet Union) and orchestrated pressure from groups of Stalinist

54 Christopher Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook: Marxist and Pragmatist* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 152–155.

stooges. The pusillanimous coverage of the Moscow Trials in organs of liberal American thought, like the *New Republic*, with which Dewey had been associated since the magazine's founding, was undoubtedly more offensive than Cannon's ingratiating praise, and the philosopher severed all relations with the publication, ending a career of contributing to its pages that had lasted roughly twenty-five years. Once he agreed to Chair the Preliminary Inquiry, moreover, Dewey faced an onslaught of retribution and personal assault. He was castigated in the Stalinist press as senile, and a business venture involving his son Fred and the Soviet trade agency, Amtorg, was scuttled. Corliss Lamont directed a smear campaign against Dewey that was further promoted by publications like *Labor Defender*. If there was a Trotskyist and liberal positive pull to get Dewey into the full swing of the Commission, the negative forces pushing him into the Inquiry harness were stronger. As Hook recalled years later, at the time of Dewey's death in 1952, "The simple truth of the matter is that Dewey made up his mind irrevocably [to Chair the Preliminary Inquiry and go to Mexico] only after he became aware of the efforts and far-flung stratagems of the Communist Party to prevent him from going."⁵⁵

Once Dewey agreed to Chair the Preliminary Inquiry and make the trek to Mexico, the Executive Committee was able to put together a small sub-commission with relative ease, although the process through which the personnel were considered and appointed rankled some. James T. Farrell, who joined the ACDLT Executive to "protect Trotsky from the Trotskyists," complained in his diary that the "Trotskyist boys" (Novack, Burnham, Morrow, etc.) had a tendency to act on their own initiative. He nonetheless recognized that while differences often arose, they were usually settled easily and amicably. If there was anyone on the Executive who tried to dominate it was the German-born labor journalist, Benjamin Stolberg. Stolberg, whose circle of influence

55 "Reminiscences of Max Shachtman," 291; Sidney Hook, *Out of Step: An Unquiet Life in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1987), 222–240; Hook, "Some Memories of John Dewey," *Commentary*, 14 (September 1952), 247; "More Prominent Liberals Join Defense of Trotsky/Statement of John Dewey and Horace M. Kallen," *Labor Action*, 27 February 1937; Novack, "How Trotsky Defense Committee was Organized," 40; George Novack, "Radical Intellectuals in the 1930s," 29 (March – April 1968), 29, quoting Edmund Wilson; Eugene Lyons, *The Red Decade: The Stalinist Penetration of America* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941), 252–265; Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 304; Wald, *James T. Farrell*, 74–75; James T. Farrell, "Dewey in Mexico," in Farrell, *Reflections at Fifty and Other Essays* (New York: Vanguard, 1954), esp. 101–103; Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 131–132. For a sampling of Hook's letters from this period on behalf of the Trotsky Defense Committee see Edward S. Shapiro, ed., *Letters of Sidney Hook: Democracy, Communism, and the Cold War* (Armark, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), 43–60.

extended from writers such as Sinclair Lewis and Dorothy Thompson to David Dubinsky of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, admired Trotsky but had no desire to hitch his modest political ambitions to the old warhorse of permanent revolution. It was Stolberg who kept Farrell off the Preliminary Sub-commission of Inquiry. That body, constituted in relatively short order, consisted of Dewey as Chairman; LaFollette as Secretary; Stolberg; the German Marxist, Otto Ruehle, living in exile in Mexico, and known for his staunch opposition to World War I and collaborations with Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, and Franz Mehring; and, finally, a journalist and historian with connections to Tina Modotti and Diego Rivera, well known as a preeminent Latin American author, Carleton Beals. Put together with deliberate care not to include any Trotskyists, the Dewey Commission projected impartiality and propriety. Dewey's academic credentials, reputation for open-mindedness, and record of integrity were critical components of the Committee's public presentation and authority. If the vetting of the sub-commissioners had been accelerated to the point of being perfunctory, no one could reasonably claim, as was commonly voiced in Stalinist circles, that Trotsky was being investigated by his own followers.⁵⁶

The larger Commission, established later, included the sub-commissioners as well as Alfred Rosmer, the French Trotskyist; Wendelin Thomas, a Communist member of the German parliament during the 1920s, who had previously been involved in a 1918 sailors' uprising; Edward A. Ross, a University of Wisconsin sociology professor; Carlo Tresca, the anarcho-syndicalist editor of New York's *Il Martello*; John Chamberlain, a *New York Times* book reviewer and early advocate of Trotsky's right to asylum; and Francisco Zamora, a Mexican journalist and editorial writer for *El Universal*. Albert Goldman served as Trotsky's lawyer during the tribunal hearings, while John F. Finerty, who had acted for both Sacco and Vanzetti and Tom Mooney, was the Commission's counsel. Albert Glotzer, who earned a living as a court reporter, was recruited on short notice by Felix Morrow. He made his way from Chicago to Coyoacan, where he was responsible for taking down the proceedings of the hearings and transcribing them for publication.⁵⁷

Early in April 1937, Dewey and a small New York contingent boarded a train for Mexico City. Traveling with him were the sub-commissioners Suzanne LaFollette and Benjamin Stolberg; Trotskyist members of the ACDLT, George

56 See, for instance, "Trotsky Investigates Himself," *New Masses*, 20 April 1937; "Inside the Trotsky Trial," *New Masses*, 27 April 1937.

57 Short biographies of all members of the Subcommission and Commission appear in Dewey, LaFollette, and Stolberg, eds., *Not Guilty*, v-vi; Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 255.

Novack and Pearl Kluger, the latter serving as secretary of the Sub-commission hearings; and James T. Farrell. Farrell later recalled that Dewey long wondered if Stalin's course was not a more sensible path for the Soviet Union than Trotsky's; Dewey may even have suspected that the leader of the Left Opposition might have attempted to have Stalin assassinated. The liberal philosopher worked hard to inform himself on relevant matters and spent the long train trip reading background material and listening intently to his fellow travelers.⁵⁸ Arriving in Mexico City on 6 April 1937, Dewey and his entourage prepared for the hearings, scheduled to begin four days later. They rubbed shoulders with a small legion of Trotskyists and sympathizers, all very busy collating papers, arranging documents, filing letters, and translating materials for the preliminary hearings.⁵⁹

Tensions ran high. Stolberg and LaFollette, having perhaps already attempted something of a coup of the Executive Committee, continued their campaign to reduce the influence of its Trotskyist leadership core. In Mexico they settled for bringing George Novack, the leading Trotskyist on the ACDLT, down a peg or two. They chose this moment to express concern that Trotskyists such as Novack should be isolated from them lest their impartiality as commissioners be questioned. Dewey rejected this eleventh-hour demand, but Trotsky bent to accommodate, well aware that the hard-working, discreet, and committed Novack did not seek a place in the limelight. In addition, a contingent of somewhat heretical Trotskyists and Trotskyist sympathizers – erstwhile Oehlerites Herbert Solow and John McDonald and the young militant and future pornographer and science fiction writer, Bernard Wolfe – seemed at times to anger Trotsky, who was under considerable strain to prepare for the hearings and the cross-examinations he would endure. Trotsky expected much of those present and was irritated by lackadaisical work habits or any failure by his young supporters to meet his standard of personal deportment – something that John

58 Farrell, "Dewey in Mexico," 105; Corliss Lamont, ed., *Dialogue on John Dewey* (New York: Horizon, 1959), 69. One author claims that Dewey confided in Farrell on the train to Mexico that, "he was inclined to believe Stalin's charge that Trotsky had conspired to assassinate him." See Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, 248, and for Dewey's possible belief in Trotsky being guilty of attempting to have Stalin killed, 304.

59 Among those working in Coyoacan preparing for the prehearings were Americans Ruth Ageloff, Bernard Wolfe, Herbert Solow, John McDonald and his wife Dorothy Eisner, Charles Rumford Walker and his wife Adelaide, and two European Trotskyists, Jan Frankel and Jean van Heijenoort. See Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 256–257; van Heijenoort, *With Trotsky in Exile*, 108–110; Trotsky to Shachtman, Novack, and Sarah Weber, 31 January 1937, Chrono File January – October 1937, Folder WP: 20–31 January 1937, PRL, where Trotsky writes, "Here with Van and Wolfe, we are working like ditch-diggers preparing material."

McDonald and Albert Goldman fell well short of when they actually came to physical blows over one angry disagreement.

The lead-up to the tribunal constituted an atmosphere of foreboding. Fear of Stalinist attack and physical violence was ever-present. James T. Farrell worked with others to construct brick and sandbag barricades outside the large windows of Trotsky's study, shielding him from possible assassin's bullets as he worked through the night. Writers such as Charles Rumford Walker and Farrell routinely toted machine guns or strapped holstered pistols to their sides. As the April hearings approached, the mood at the Coyoacan house where Trotsky and his "secretariat" feverishly prepared was one of troubled anticipation, with virtually everyone involved, except perhaps the serene John Dewey, on something of an edge.⁶⁰

60 The above paragraphs draw on Farrell, "Dewey in Mexico," 106–107; Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 136–137; George Novack, "How the Moscow Trials Were Exposed," *International Socialist Review*, (May 1977), 3–4, 10; Wald, *James T. Farrell*, 158, n. 39. Of the Solow, McDonald, and Wolfe trio, McDonald perhaps harbored the most resentment of those affiliated with United States Trotskyists and like Solow he aligned at first with Oehlerism. He was particularly hostile to Cannon and Shachtman as the leading opponents of Oehler and key figures in orchestrating the entry of the Workers Party into the Socialist Party. See Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 109; Sidney Lens, *Unrepentant Radical: An American Activists' Account of Five Turbulent Decades* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), 42. If Farrell was closer to the Trotskyists, evidenced by his living in Mexico with Novack, Glotzer, and Kluger, the foursome becoming "a very close group, going to and from the daily hearings and eating together often," he nonetheless shared with Solow, McDonald, and Wolfe certain resentments about how writers were treated by figures like Cannon. Farrell wrestled with his Trotskyist political inclinations and his ultimate commitment to the art of writing in March 1937, before his departure for Mexico: "I got the feeling more and more that politics is a dragnet and once you get caught up in it, you are very likely to be diverted from your career and the work that you can do most competently, and that you are very likely to be ruined." Bernard Wolfe was committed to Trotsky during the time of the Coyoacan hearings but never apparently agreed entirely with the leading figure of the nascent Fourth International. He would later declare offensively that "writers were in a certain sense the niggers of the left movements ... [T]hey were looked down upon as cafeteria intellectuals, parlor activists, undisciplined and irresponsible bohemians. They were defined as incorrigibly petty bourgeois, constantly slapped in the face with their non-prolism. ... This anti-egghead arrogance was most vicious in Stalinist circles, but it was by no means unknown among certain Trotskyites." See Wald, *James T. Farrell*, 69; Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 257; Alain Dugrand, *Trotsky in Mexico* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), 26; Bernard Wolfe, *Memoirs of a Not Altogether Shy Pornographer* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 37–39.

5 Trotsky's Testimony

The hearings of the Preliminary Sub-commission commenced on the morning of 10 April 1937. Farrell described the mood as taut, but recognized that the inquiry was “a spectacle rare in history.” Glotzer remembered the event differently, seeing in it a “festive occasion,” with the journalists in attendance from Mexico, the United States, Norway, England, and France providing “a weighty index to the importance attributed to the hearings.” There was considerable apprehension that Mexican Stalinists or Comintern agents would attempt to disrupt the proceedings, raid the premises to steal or destroy documents and affidavits, or assault, even assassinate, Trotsky. Police guards ringed the Rivera-Kahlo villa. They paid particular attention to the courtyard entrance, where all who entered were searched for weapons, including the tribunal members themselves. Many people who wanted to watch the proceedings were turned away, and the large room in which business was to be conducted was filled. It accommodated the sub-commissioners, seated at a table in the front of the room; newspaper correspondents crowded into two rows at the back; and an audience of 35–40 invited guests, including representatives of six Mexican labor organizations and their translators. Supportive telegrams, endorsing the proceedings, were sent by Cannon’s California comrade in the Socialist Party, Glen Trimble, representatives of the west coast maritime workers’ unions, and various Minneapolis labor officials, among them leaders of the teamsters. Trotsky, dressed in his usual neat attire of suit, white shirt, and tie, occupied a table to the right of the sub-commissioners, flanked by Natalia and his aides. His lawyer, Albert Goldman, faced him from across the room. Among those declining to attend were Soviet diplomats and delegates from the United States and Mexican Communist Parties. Also absent was Lombardo Toledano, a pro-Stalinist labor leader in Mexico City who had vociferously opposed Trotsky’s asylum.⁶¹

Dewey opened the hearings with an appreciative acknowledgement of the Mexican government’s role in providing Trotsky asylum and facilitating the inquiry. This had broadened “political democracy.” “Millions of workers of city and country, of hand and brain,” declared Dewey, believed that “no man should be condemned without a chance to defend himself,” and Mexico had earned

61 Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 136; Farrell, “Dewey in Mexico,” 106–107; Farrell, “A Memoir of Trotsky,” *University of Kansas City Review*, 23 (Summer 1957), 293–298; Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 258–259; George Novack, “Trotsky’s Defense Presented at Mexican Hearings,” *News Bulletin of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky*, 6 (2 May 1937), 1; Deutscher, *Prophet Outcast*, 353; Dugrand, *Trotsky in Mexico*, 20–26. On the telegrams of support from the United States see Dewey et al., eds., *The Case of Leon Trotsky*, 36–37.

itself a place of honor with world opinion by its actions in allowing a “foreigner [to] defend himself before foreigners on Mexican soil.” Reproaching those countries “whose political system or current policy bars the holding of our meetings” inside their borders, Dewey stressed that the tribunal was neither a court nor a jury, but merely an impartial investigatory sub-commission. Its purpose was to take Trotsky’s testimony, cross-examine him, and gather as much evidence as possible, which it would present to the full International Commission, the body that would decide on guilt or innocence. Dewey recognized that the task before those assembled was a difficult one, “beset by bitter controversy.” But having dedicated his life to “public enlightenment in the interests of society,” Dewey stated that he would not have been true to himself if he had refused to participate in the Commission of Inquiry.⁶²

These opening remarks set the tone for a week of hearings, in which courtroom procedure was followed. Goldman introduced Trotsky, asked him to provide a biographical statement, and elaborate on his history in the revolutionary movement. He specifically sought to have Trotsky present arguments to counter allegations made during the Moscow Trials that impugned his honor as a lifelong socialist. To rebut the slanders concocted in the Soviet courts, Trotsky and his supporters assembled affidavits and documents that called into question the testimonies of capitulators. A conspiratorial meeting at a hotel was shown to have been impossible, as the establishment did not exist at the time; many supposed clandestine meetings with Trotsky were proven not to have happened because there was irrefutable material evidence that Trotsky had been elsewhere at the time. Claims of Trotsky’s and Sedov’s furtive contacts with a lengthy list of former opponents of Stalin were demonstrated to be fictitious. Many of Trotsky’s supposed collaborators in the alleged campaign to undermine the Soviet Union were proven, through their writings and communications, to in fact have been his adversaries. Trotsky’s previous history with Old Bolsheviks such as Zinoviev and others was revealed to have been of an entirely different character than the Moscow Trials prosecutor alleged.

Trotsky himself testified for thirteen sessions, stretching over eight days, the proceedings broken only intermittently by the interrogation of Jan Frankel, one of Trotsky’s secretaries. Cross-examined by the commissioners, sometimes vigorously, Trotsky mostly spoke in English, except on rare occasions when he addressed Ruehle in German, or had Solow translate something in French. Incisive and interesting questions arose, with Trotsky grilled on his relations

62 Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 137–138; Novack, “Trotsky’s Defense Presented at Mexican Hearings,” 1, 3; and, for the full Dewey statement, Dewey et al., eds., *Case of Leon Trotsky*, 1–5.

and differences with Lenin, as well as about issues such as the dictatorship of the proletariat, revolution and bureaucratization, and terrorism. Often apologizing for his English, Trotsky's formal use of the language sometimes punctuated the proceedings with unintended humor.

Trotsky: Yes, a revolutionary must know English, and with the help of patience I will learn English. (Laughter)

Confident and assertive in presenting an accounting of his revolutionary history, Trotsky occasionally engaged in amusing self-deprecation:

Goldman: Can you tell us something of the story to the effect that you were a tailor in New York City?

Trotsky: Tailor?

Goldman: Yes, there are some stories -----

Trotsky: Unfortunately, I did not learn any productive trade in my life. I regret that very much. (Laughter)

Questioned by Goldman as to Radek's role in the revolutionary movement in Russia after arriving from Germany in 1918, Trotsky's response again addressed the relationship of politics and earning a living:

Trotsky: He didn't play a role during the Revolution, in the exact sense of the word. He came later. He was active for a certain time – throughout he was active as a journalist. He is a journalist.

Goldman: That is his main profession?

Trotsky: That is his profession; that is his nature. (Laughter)

More often, however, Trotsky's testimony highlighted tragic events in his life and those who had denounced him in Moscow.

Goldman: [What was] the relationship that existed between the persons who remained loyal to the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union, and the capitulators.

Trotsky: I could quote a letter from an Oppositionist who denounces Radek. He asked him for money for a sick Oppositionist in Siberia. Radek answered – I will quote what this Oppositionist writes: 'In response to a request to help a deported Bolshevik who is gravely ill,' Radek refused, adding, 'He will return more rapidly. He measures with his disgusting little standard!' When friends are split, the

antagonism is more bitter than between the ruling group and the Opposition as a whole. It is a historical and political law that the relationship between the Oppositionists and the capitulators was all those years more bitter than the relationship between the Oppositionists and the Stalinists.

Goldman: Among the defendants, then, of the last two trials, there is not a single former Oppositionist who did not capitulate before the trials – is that right?

Trotsky: With the exception only of Muralov; he did not capitulate officially, but abandoned politics. ... All of the others capitulated officially, and became my bitterest enemies.

At the end of the hearings Trotsky answered questions from representatives of the Mexican trade unions; Goldman offered a lengthy and impressive summary; and Trotsky provided an eloquent closing statement, in which he refuted, one-by-one, the allegations against him.⁶³

Trotsky was aware of how his former comrades were required to abase themselves in humiliating public displays, orchestrated to convince the world of the legitimacy of the bizarre and fantastic charges concocted to justify the late 1930s show-trials.⁶⁴ But he placed great faith in the Commission, its impartiality, and its integrity. Trotsky anticipated that those who valued the truth constituted “a precious cell of unmarketable public conscience.” Convinced that “not everybody can be bought,” Trotsky declared that in spite of “intrigues, bribes, and calumny,” the Commission would carry the truth into the instinctually sympathetic venues of the “broad, popular masses.” He rejected the notion that the conscience of the world could be bullied. “The experience of my life, in which there has been no lack of either success or of failures,” Trotsky con-

63 The block quotes above are from Dewey et al., eds., *The Case of Leon Trotsky*, 18, 101, 132; and Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 265. Much comment on and descriptions of the hearings appears in Hook, *Out of Step*, 218–247; Deutscher, *Prophet Outcast*, 371–382; Gary Bullert, *The Politics of John Dewey* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1983), 134–141; Alan Wald, “Memories of the John Dewey Commission: Forty Years Later,” *Antioch Review*, 35 (1977), 438–451; Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook*, 155–161; Alan B. Spitzer, “John Dewey, the ‘Trial’ of Leon Trotsky and the Search for Historical Truth,” *History and Theory*, 29 (February 1990), 16–37; Arthur Jay Klinghoffer and Judith Apter Klinghoffer, *International Citizens’ Tribunals: Mobilizing Public Opinion to Advance Human Rights* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), esp. 79–90. Trotsky’s summary of the hearings is Trotsky, “The Preliminary Inquiry at Coyoacan, Spring 1937,” originally published in *Les Crimes de Staline* (1937), translated in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 264–273.

64 On Moscow Trials confessions and their Stalinist extraction see Trotsky, *Stalin*, 622–636.

cluded, “has not only not destroyed my faith in the clear, bright future of mankind, but, on the contrary has given it an indestructible temper. This faith in reason, in truth, in human solidarity ... has become mature, but no less ardent.” Trotsky’s summation was met with a spontaneous burst of applause from the audience. Glotzer, writing more than 50 years later, noted, “This moment I shall never forget.” Dewey declined to make any final remarks, declaring, “Anything I can say will be an anti-climax.” The Coyoacan proceedings closed with Dewey reminding all present that the Preliminary Sub-commission had come to an end, “opening the investigation of the larger and complete Commission.”⁶⁵

6 Carleton Beals and Stalinism at Work in the Preliminary Sub-commission

One of the Preliminary Sub-Commission panel members, Carleton Beals, resigned in the midst of the Coyoacan proceedings. As a member of the Commission, Beals was something of an anomaly. He came by car from Los Angeles, and while he at first met with Dewey, his old friend Benjamin Stolberg, and others, the introductions and reunion being cordial, he soon separated himself, did not participate in the prehearing discussions of commissioners, checked out of his hotel, and evaded requests for his new address. Dewey and the other preliminary Sub-Commission members were of the view that Beals was “constantly with people who were known to be against the purposes of the Commission,” one of whom may well have been Harry Block. A former editor-in-chief at the New York publishing house Covici-Friede, Block moved to Mexico in 1935 and married a daughter of the arch-anti-Trotskyist, Toledano. Herbert Solow pegged Block as a GPU agent, James T. Farrell considered the American ex-patriot “a Stalinist,” and a *New York Times* reporter sympathetic to the Comintern later claimed that Block had been “the man who played the big role in swinging Carlton [sic] Beals.”⁶⁶

65 Dewey et al., eds., *The Case of Leon Trotsky*, esp. the closing remarks, 584–585; Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 271.

66 Dewey et al., eds., *The Case of Leon Trotsky*, xxv–xxvi; Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 266–267. Beals’s biographer has accepted his subject’s denial that he became a voice of Stalinism inside the Preliminary Sub-Commission of Inquiry in Mexico, and even embraces the view that Beals was without bias. This conclusion is questioned by one recent scholarly engagement with the issues. See John A. Britton, *Carleton Beals: A Radical Journalist in Latin America* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 166–186; Spitzer, “John Dewey, the ‘Trial’ of Leon Trotsky and the Search for Historical Truth,” 23.

Beals remained aloof from other tribunal members, but nevertheless attended sessions and asked questions of Trotsky. Initially he made no complaints to the preliminary hearing or charged any wrong doing. Some of Beals's questions to Trotsky seemed, in retrospect, to be searching out information that could have been useful to Trotsky's Stalinist persecutors, such as a pointed request that Trotsky reveal whether all of his archives were now present in Mexico, a query Trotsky answered "with reservations." Beals also took positions somewhat different than other members of the panel, noting that while in the United States a defendant was considered innocent until proven guilty, in the Soviet Union legal proceedings unfolded under the assumption of guilt, with defendants expected to prove their innocence. With respect to evidence and documentation provided by Trotsky, Beals asked bluntly for some assurance that "you have not destroyed that which was unfavorable to yourself."⁶⁷

These blunt and skeptical inquiries and assertions paled in significance before Beals's interrogation of Trotsky at the eleventh session, on the afternoon of 16 April 1937. On this day he addressed early Comintern policies related to building the Soviet economy and promoting proletarian insurgency throughout the world, clearly attempting to locate Trotsky in the controversy that pitted advocates of "socialism in one country" against those advancing a perspective of world revolution. But the actual purpose was less to develop an understanding of the finer points of programmatic distinction between Stalinism and Trotskyism which, in any case, had not emerged in the period 1919–20 that Beals was addressing. Instead, it seems that Beals was suggesting that Trotsky had a history of intervening in the affairs of other countries, and that he was on the wrong side of a Soviet historical divide between so-called Stalin-like statesmen, committed to building a new economy at home, and rash adventurous, advocates of permanent revolution abroad. This related to broad popular frontist liberal criticism of the Commission of Inquiry. Malcolm Cowley of the *New Republic*, for example, claimed that, "Stalin with all his faults and virtues represents the Communist revolution. Trotsky has come to represent the 'second revolution' that is trying to weaken it in the face of attacks from the fascist powers."⁶⁸

Beals pushed this line of interrogation in threatening directions, intimating that Trotsky had sent an emissary to Mexico in 1919–20, Mikhail Borodin, to establish a Communist Party with the intent of overthrowing the duly consti-

67 Dewey et al., eds., *The Case of Leon Trotsky*, 51–52.

68 Cowley is quoted in Spitzer, "John Dewey, the 'Trial' of Leon Trotsky and the Search for Historical Truth," 20–21. See also Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook*, 157–159.

tuted government.⁶⁹ Trotsky refuted the allegation, noting that at the time he was in charge of the Red Army, embroiled in civil war, and he rarely left his military train. He had no time to be thinking of Mexico, preoccupied as he was with the battles of his own Russian fronts. He stated that he had never met Borodin, although he knew of him. Moreover, if Borodin had been sent to Mexico, it would have been at the direction of the Communist International, headed by Zinoviev, without any involvement of the country's top military commander.

Trotsky pressed Beals to produce any documentation that might confirm these unsubstantiated accusations. He was able to elicit from the sub-commissioner an acknowledgement that the only evidence Beals could produce was a conversation involving Borodin. Wondering if this information had come to Beals via Stalinist channels, Trotsky was aware that if the allegations were believed, it might well turn the Mexican government against him, compromise his asylum, and undermine, even terminate, the Preliminary Sub-Commission inquiry. He saw the "sinister" and "tendentious Stalinist" hand of intrigue reaching into the hearings, and demanded that Beals explain where his "knowledge" of the Borodin "information" came from, suggesting that this might "involve Mr. Beals's personal honor," and could well reveal "a new amalgam created with the purpose of preventing me from unmasking the judicial crimes in Moscow."

The Beals line of questioning also threw the Preliminary Sub-Commission itself into a quandary. In a private session after the hearing, the Sub-Commission's lawyer, John F. Finerty, protested vigorously that questions premised on private information unknown to the panel of inquiry as a whole were "highly improper, would be sufficient cause for mistrial in any ordinary court, and that he could not continue as counsel if they were to be permitted in the future." In addition, all of the sub-commissioners with the exception of Beals were of the view that the claims made relating to Borodin were not relevant to the inquiry into the legitimacy of the charges levelled against Trotsky in the Moscow Trials. Beals responded to Finerty with a belligerent declaration that either he or the

69 On Borodin see Daniel J. Jacobs, *Borodin: Stalin's Man in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Charles Shipman, *It Had to Be Revolution: Memoirs of an American Radical* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 82–91. Subsequent scholarship has not established any connection between Trotsky and Borodin's Mexican sojourn. See Viktor L. Kheifets and Laza Kheifets, "The Mexican Link in Spanish Communism: Michael Borodin's Mission to the Western Hemisphere, 1919–1920 and the Creation of the Communist Party of Spain," *International Newsletter of Communist Studies Online*, 16 (No. 23, 2010), 79–88.

lawyer must leave the Commission, and then failed to attend a meeting called that evening to discuss the matter (keeping the other commissioners waiting until midnight). Finally, he had his wife deliver a letter of “irrevocable resignation” the next morning. That letter asserted wrongly that the proceedings had fulfilled their mandate “to the extent possible with the present arrangements,” which Beals considered had failed to conduct “a truly serious investigation of the charges” against Trotsky.⁷⁰

After his resignation, Beals wrote an article for the Mexican journal *Futuro*, in which he repeated his allegations, while presenting himself as an impartial seeker of truth, and casting aspersions on the Dewey Commission.⁷¹ In a widely circulated statement, he panned the Coyoacan tribunal as little more than a “whitewash,” caricatured the other commissioners as sycophants and supplicants who were committed to doing Trotsky’s bidding. “The hushed adoration of the other members of the Commission for Mr. Trotsky throughout the hearings has defeated all spirit of honest investigation.” Beals also crossed swords with Sidney Hook and others in the Baton Rouge-based literary journal, *Southern Review*. He again self-servingly painted himself as a paragon of objectivity, while decrying those, like Hook, whom he designated “a fanatical Trotskyite zealot” using Dewey for “narrow factional purposes.” In a particularly poisonous, pseudo-psychological *exposé* in the *Saturday Evening Post*, Beals extracted his revenge for Trotsky’s intimation that the Latin Americanist had compromised his integrity during the hearings by relying on clearly dubious Stalinist misinformation. Insisting that Trotsky’s “mental faculties are blurred by a consuming lust of hate for Stalin, a furious uncontrollable venom which has its counterpart in something bordering on a persecution complex,” Beals stated that the Old Bolshevik could no longer tolerate anyone who “disagreed with

70 The above paragraphs draw on Dewey et al., eds., *The Case of Leon Trotsky*, xxv–xxvi, 411–418; Dewey, *Truth is on the March*, 8–9; Deutscher, *Prophet Outcast*, 374–376; Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 268–269. The *Southern Review* exchange was precipitated by the Stalin-sympathetic Frederick L. Schuman, “Leon Trotsky: Martyr or Renegade?” *Southern Review*, 3 (Summer 1937), 51–74, which was followed by published responses and further correspondence involving Cowley, Beals, Hook, and Farrell. The entire sharp discussion is discussed in Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook*, 159–161 and Spitzer, “John Dewey, the ‘Trial’ of Leon Trotsky and the Search for Historical Truth,” 24–25. A highly negative eye-witness report from the Mexico hearings, reinforcing Beals’s dismissals, appeared in Marion Hammett and William Smith, “Inside the Trotsky Trial: A Report by Two Eye-Witnesses,” *New Masses*, 27 April 1937.

71 Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 268–269; and for Trotsky’s empirical and political refutation of the Beals *Futuro* article, Trotsky, “Mr. Beals as a Witness,” 18 May 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 291–297.

him,” considering all honest dissenters to be GPU agents or “corrupted by the gold of Stalin.” Throughout these bitter post-mortems, Beals described Trotsky as vain, given to “violent explosions,” and tending to lose his composure when challenged.⁷²

7 Delimitation by Default

Farrell, Solow, and Glotzer saw things very differently. Glotzer later replied directly to Beals that “There was no explosion and no loss of composure, as any persons attending the hearings could verify.” Most witnesses to the proceedings regarded Trotsky’s performance as spellbinding, if often emotionally draining. Solow thought Trotsky devastatingly effective in refuting Stalinist falsehood, and speculated that had the tribunal involved an actual Communist Party prosecutor he would barely have escaped the hearings alive. But he was particularly impressed by Trotsky’s evident distress when asked about his family and the price paid by his sons and daughter for their father’s refusal to countenance Stalin’s crimes. As the *de facto* “court reporter,” Glotzer was struck with Trotsky’s “astonishing performance” in a language “essentially foreign to him.” This led to a document that in its final published form amounted to 554 printed pages.

72 Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 268–269; “Mr. Beals Resigns from Trotsky Commission,” *Soviet Russia Today* (May 1937), 38; Carleton Beals, “The Fewer Outsiders the Better: The Master Comes to Judgement,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 12 June 1937, 74, 76. Trotsky’s ultimate comment on Beals would come in a letter to V.F. Calverton, editor of the *Modern Monthly*. Calverton had solicited an article from Trotsky on the threat of war, but Trotsky refused to contribute to the publication as long as Beals continued to be listed as an associate editor. In Trotsky’s view “there cannot be the slightest doubt about the moral physiognomy of this gentlemen,” whose participation in the Coyoacan hearings was followed by publications that were “nothing but a series of lies and falsifications dictated by the interests of the GPU.” Pointing out to Calverton that Beals required collaboration with the *Modern Monthly* in order to “preserve the mask of ‘independence,’” Trotsky insisted that, “Stalinism is the syphilis of the workers movement,” and those carriers of this disease “should be submitted to a pitiless quarantine. The hour has struck for the unsparing demarcation of honest people from all the agents, friends, lawyers, publicists and poets of the GPU.” Leon Trotsky, “A Letter to the Editor of the ‘Modern Monthly,’” *Socialist Appeal*, 11 December 1937. Diego Rivera would later resign from the *Modern Monthly*, protesting Beals’ behavior at the Dewey Commission hearings in Coyoacan, insisting that he had no choice but to terminate his role as the magazine’s art editor as long as Beals remained affiliated with Calverton’s journal. Rivera thought Calverton’s refusal to address Beals’ Stalinist collaboration established that the *Modern Monthly* “places its regard for clannishness above the elementary demands of political hygiene.” See “Rivera Resigns from *Modern Monthly*,” *Socialist Appeal*, 29 January 1938.

Even if distance often politically recast memory of the event by witnesses, it is clear that the hearings were seen by all as an extraordinary occurrence.

At the time of the tribunal Farrell, for instance, described Trotsky's testimony as a "spectacle rare in history," a demolition of "the macabre fables of the Moscow Trials" unrivalled in its endurance, coherence, and logic. He wrote to Margaret Marshall, book review editor at the *Nation*, that Trotsky's intellectual breadth exceeded that of Cromwell or Robespierre, and that she should be ashamed of the "editorial policy" of her magazine, which deserved to be "eternally disgraced for its double dealing and cowardice" in failing to speak truth to Stalin's power. More than a decade later, Farrell shifted gears, accenting instead the differences between Dewey and Trotsky over means and ends, democracy, and the limitations of a brilliant mind that could not liberate itself from a tragic absolutism. Even Dewey locked political horns with Trotsky in 1938, shortly after the completion of the Commission's work. The two clashed over liberal versus Marxist views of morality, with Dewey concluding with respect to Trotsky that, "'Truth, justice, humanity' ... are receding into the background before the bare overpowering interest of the man and what he has to say."

During the Coyoacan tribunal, Dewey and Trotsky were on the best of terms, exchanging flatteries, but by late 1937 the former was adamant that he held no brief for the latter's political beliefs: "The great lesson to be derived from these amazing revelations," Dewey concluded from Trotsky's testimony at the Mexican Preliminary Sub-Commission, "is the complete breakdown of revolutionary Marxism. Nor do I think that a confirmed Communist is going to get anywhere by concluding that because he can no longer believe in Stalin he must now pin his faith on Trotsky."⁷³

Dewey nonetheless returned from Mexico committed to following through on drafting a full statement addressing the charges for which Trotsky and Sedov were convicted *in absentia* in Moscow. Dewey's public statements in New York, delivered at a 9 May 1937 Mecca Temple mass meeting entitled "Truth is on the March," and published in pamphlet form as well as in the *New Leader*, lashed out at those liberals who shirked from their duty to defend "the com-

73 The above paragraphs draw on Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 139; Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 265–266, 269; Wald, *James T. Farrell*, 70; Farrell, "Dewey in Mexico," 115–119; for the Dewey-Trotsky debate over means and ends, which appeared originally in *The New Internationalist* in 1938, as well as other related commentary, Leon Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours: The Marxist View of Morality* (New York: Resistance Books, 2000). As Deutscher notes, Dewey never relinquished his admiration of Trotsky's "intellectual power," and the ways in which he wielded it during the Preliminary Sub-Commission, organizing "the mass of his evidence and argumentation and conveyed to us the meaning of every relevant fact." Deutscher, *Prophet Outcast*, 381–382.

plete and courageous development of freedom of inquiry.” Detailing the work of the sub-committee in Coyoacan, Dewey insisted that to “hold Trotsky guilty of the specific charges upon which he was convicted because of his well-known opposition to the present rulers of the Soviet Union is not fair or square. ... Lines are being draw between devotion to justice and adherence to a faction, between fair play and a love of darkness that is reactionary in effect no matter what banner it floats.” Comparing Trotsky’s vilification to that of Sacco and Vanzetti in the 1920s, Dewey argued that the conviction of political people for their beliefs rather than for any actual criminal acts should be repugnant to all who value liberty of thought. He minced no words in condemning what he regarded as the cowardly incapacity of some liberals and leftists to face unpleasant facts regarding the leadership of the Soviet Union. These May 1937 pronouncements anticipated the “not guilty” verdict that would be delivered, in 1938, by the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made Against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials that Dewey headed.⁷⁴

The Commission of Inquiry completed its work over the course of the last half of 1937 and into 1938. It involved co-ordination of the larger eleven-person body, chaired by Dewey, for whom Suzanne LaFollette provided the bulk of the administrative work. The Preliminary Sub-Commission produced Glotzer’s transcribed Trotsky/Frankel testimony, as well as countless documents, and was complimented by a rogatory commission created by the *Comité pour l’Enquête sur la procès de Moscow*, which held eleven sessions from 12 May through 22 June 1937, in Paris. These hearings took testimony from Trotsky’s son, Leon Sedov, and four other witnesses, and accepted documentary evidence provided by Sedov. A final Sub-Commission in New York, convening 26–27 July 1937, involved eleven witnesses, whose testimony was taken in five sessions, three in public and two *in camera*. The preparation of the Commission’s final report involved weighing the verbal testimonies of Trotsky and others against the archive of affidavits, written materials by Trotsky, Sedov, Lenin, Stalin, Radek, and Zinoviev, as well as private correspondence, telegrams, press reports, and official documents. This included “several thousand” items given to the Dewey Commission by the Trotskyist forces in Mexico, in addition to the published transcripts of the Moscow Trials. Assessing this massive documentation proved

74 Dewey, *Truth is on the March*; Farrell, “Dewey in Mexico,” 120–121; Dewey, “Dewey Rebukes Those Liberals Who Will Not Look Into Facts,” *New Leader*, 15 May 1937, quoted and discussed in Bullert, *The Politics of John Dewey*, 135. The Mecca Temple meetings, in which Dewey occupied center stage, was of course organized by Trotskyists, with Martin Abern having a decisive role. See Abern to Hansen, 14 May 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: May 1937, from Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 2, File 4, PRL.

a prodigious and painstaking task. A rigorous effort to historically contextualize events and personages was also demanded. Dewey, LaFollette, and Stolberg largely carried the responsibility of writing up the final report. This required further correspondence/conversation with the Trotskyists centrally involved in the ACDLT's work, especially Novack, Shachtman, Morrow, and Solow. Shachtman, corresponding with Trotsky, claimed to be taking time off editing the *Socialist Appeal* to work "with LaFollette on the draft of the Commission's report."⁷⁵ It was at this point that the "delimitation" that Trotsky had insisted on when his comrades undertook to organize the ACDLT kicked in. It came not so much by the Trotskyists differentiating themselves from liberal allies, as through LaFollette, Stolberg, and others asserting independence from their revolutionary co-workers.

This differentiation was expressed abstractly over the course of 1937–38 in the Trotsky-Dewey divide over "Their Morals and Ours/Means and Ends." Dewey could not countenance what he viewed as Trotsky's absolutism, and in particular resisted any claim that class struggle be privileged as a vehicle of social transformation. If his defense of Trotsky against the charges of the Moscow Trials would be resolute, his refusal of revolutionary communism was never in doubt. "Class struggle as the law of historical change" was, in Dewey's liberal individualist framework, *the* distorting absolutism: "Deduction of ends set up, of means and attitudes, from this law as the pressing thing, makes all moral questions, that is, all questions of the end to be finally attained, meaningless. To be scientific about ends does not mean to read them out of laws, whether the laws are natural or social." For Dewey, orthodox Marxism shared with orthodox religion and conventional idealism a mistaken Hegelian assumption that "human ends are interwoven into the very texture and structure of existence," a proposition he thought submerged the individual foundations of liberty and justice in the collectivity of the mass.

This divide also drifted into discussions of art and culture, where Trotskyist sensibilities aligned with artists who considered, in contrast to Stalinist doctrine, that in the aesthetic sphere independence from Party control was necessary. Within *Partisan Review* circles, Philip Rahv, William Phillips, and others certainly favored Trotsky over Stalin, and saw Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* (1924) as a rare example of a revolutionary Marxist producing laudable literary criticism; Trotsky's alignment with artists such as Kahlo and Rivera,

75 On the procedure of the Commission see Dewey, LaFollette, and Stolberg, eds., *Not Guilty*, 3–15. On Shachtman's claims and Dewey's communications see, for instance, Shachtman to Trotsky, 30 August 1937, Roll 3, Reel 3346; Solow to Dewey, 17 October 1937; Shachtman to Dewey, 4 November 1937, Roll 5, Reel 3348, MS Papers.

as well as his collaboration with the surrealist, André Breton, solidified this support. But the trajectory and tone of even those artists and intellectuals sympathetic to Trotsky suggested that they did not necessarily consider art and revolution to be natural allies. Rejecting the Stalinist straightjacket of “socialist realism” or “proletarian fiction,” Trotsky proposed that:

Art can become a strong ally of revolution only insofar as it remains faithful to itself. Poets, painters, sculptors, and musicians will themselves find their own approach and methods, if the struggle for freedom of the oppressed classes and peoples scatters the clouds of skepticism and of pessimism that covers the horizon of mankind.

As Trotsky insisted, creative works of culture always had their beginnings in rebellion against convention, and he viewed the decay of bourgeois society as threatening to suffocate aesthetic innovation and imagination. To a dissident core of American artists, writers, and intellectuals this was both a welcome antidote to the insistence of the powerful cultural front of the Communist Party that art follow the dictates of the political vanguard, as well as a bridge too far for them to traverse. As discussions inside major organs of cultural dissidence and Trotskyism in the United States revealed in 1937–38, a delimitation of anti-Stalinist progressives and revolutionary Marxists was in the making. If Trotskyists appreciated the need for artistic independence, and journals like *Partisan Review* could accept the reciprocal relationship of art and revolution, it proved increasingly difficult to escape the gravitational field and negative force of Stalinism. A mechanical demand that cultural producers subordinate themselves to proletarian interests was anathema to many in the late 1930s, and a liberal failure to see Stalinism as an expression of the degeneration of the revolutionary party translated into a reification of artistic independence. The result was a rigid separation of cultural work and political mobilization that distorted Trotsky’s attempt to dialectically fuse art’s autonomy *and* the ways in which the development of aesthetic innovation was reciprocally related to class struggle. As an editorial in the *Socialist Appeal* argued, it was possible to decry “the sectarian spirit” that haunted the revolutionary approach to aesthetics in the epoch of Stalinism as “absolutely fatal,” at the same time calling for the cultivation of a “normal and natural relationship between a Marxist cultural organ” such as the *Partisan Review* and “a genuinely Marxist Party” of the kind Trotskyists were trying to build in the United States. This orientation championed “fraternal collaboration in a common work.” But the path followed in the late 1930s was increasingly one, not of convergence of these constituencies, but of departure. The *Socialist Appeal* suggested that the intellectuals around

Partisan Review were embracing a one-sided conception of their own “absolute independence.” As Wald suggests, “many anti-Stalinists were moving toward a view that communism itself was ‘amoral!’”⁷⁶

From at least March 1937 Trotsky had warned Harold Isaacs and others involved in the ACDLT that “The greatest danger for us is to gather problematic and doubtful people who can at the next stage betray us and completely disturb the work of the Committee. The lack of firmness and precision, moreover, gives the Stalinists the possibility of penetrating the ranks of our false ‘sympathizers’ and even of demoralizing our genuine sympathizers.” His views only solidified with his experience of Carleton Beals at the Coyoacan hearings. Trotsky came to see Beals as “a half-conscious instrument in the hands of the GPU.” Not inclined to trust those, like Shachtman, who often depicted liberal allies in the Trotsky Defense Committee as committed sympathizers, Trotsky pointed out that Max’s claims that *New York Times* journalist, Frank Kluckhohn, was an ACDLT supporter were false. Kluckhohn proved “the most venomous foe.” Trotsky was adamant that “large circles of liberals are not inclined to sustain the honest revolutionaries against the Thermidorian rascals.” He insisted, “Our politeness toward the liberals should not hinder us from speaking out what is, because this is the only way of winning the revolutionary elements in the working class.” Indeed, Trotsky had long urged that in all of the work of the ACDLT,

The most important question is to create a network of sympathetic workers’ groups around the committee, and in this way to give the committee itself a more proletarian character. The commission brings in its report. All our comrades must concentrate their efforts on bringing this report to the workers, even through small meetings. Every meeting of 100 or even

76 The intellectual history alluded to in the above paragraphs, including the Dewey-Trotsky exchange and the relationship of American Trotskyists and the *Partisan Review* group, is succinctly addressed in Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 139–147. See also Deutscher, *Prophet Outcast*, 441–443. Documents of especial relevance would include: Leon Trotsky, “Their Morals and Ours,” *New International*, 4 (June 1938), 163–173; John Dewey, “Means and Ends,” *New International*, 4 (August 1938), 232–233; William Phillips, “The Esthetic of the Founding Fathers,” *Partisan Review*, 4 (March 1938), 17, 19; Leon Trotsky, “The Future of *Partisan Review*: A Letter to Dwight Macdonald”; Trotsky, “Art and Politics in Our Epoch”; Trotsky, “Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art,” all in Paul Siegel, *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 101–124; [George Novack,] “‘Partisan Review’: A Revolt Against Stalinism Among the Intellectuals,” *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937; “Trotsky on Their Morals and Ours,” *Socialist Appeal*, 21 May 1938. For a dispute inside the Trotskyist movement related to the ground staked out in the *Socialist Appeal* editorial see Alan M. Wald, *The Revolutionary Imagination: The Poetry and Politics of John Wheelwright and Sherry Mangan* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 157–158.

five workers must not only adopt a motion of support of the commission, but also elect a permanent representative or a permanent delegate for liaison with the committee.

Trotsky pushed to utilize the findings of the Commission of Inquiry to “introduce simple and modest workers alongside the most illustrious liberals.” To him this was the “most important” thing to do. When the Preliminary Sub-Commission concluded its work, Trotsky argued for firming up the working-class character of the larger body that would work with Dewey to produce the final assessment of the Moscow Trials charges against him. Burnham, for instance, wrote to Cannon on 7 April 1937 on a point of “immediate and decisive importance.” Trotsky was insistent that the Commission needed to “have at least some solid proletarian representation,” and the New York Trotskyists proposed Harry Lundeberg, President of the Maritime Federation of the Pacific, with whom Cannon had been working closely. A month-and-a-half later, Burnham continued to press Cannon to get Lundeberg on the Commission, because he thought the maritime union leader would both strike a blow at Stalinist attempts to “drive the Trotskyists out of the labor movement” and also stabilize Dewey’s work by providing a “balance” to the influence of Stolberg and LaFollette. Burnham considered that the “source of difficulties” with this pair was “their **fright** – fright in the face of the responsibility they have undertaken, and at the isolation which they see opening up before them as a result of their stand. They shy away from almost all positive suggestion. When considering additional members of the Commission, they rule out one half of the possible candidates on the grounds that they are or might be influenced by Stalinism; and the other half on the grounds that they are influenced by Trotskyism.” Nothing would come of the attempt to secure a place for Lundeberg, but the final Commission did include one of Cannon’s oldest personal friends in labor defense mobilization, the anarchist Carlo Tresca.⁷⁷

77 Trotsky to Isaacs, 3 March 1937, Chrono File, Summer 1935/November – December 1936, Folder WP: 10–14 November 1936 (misfiled), and Burnham to Cannon, 7 April 1937, Chrono File, January – December 1937, Folder WP: April 1937, PRL; Burnham to Cannon, 22 May 1937, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Glotzer, *Trotsky*, 269–270; Trotsky, “Mr. Beals as a Witness,” 18 May 1937 and Trotsky to Comrades, 20 April 1937 in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 296, 274–275. On Cannon’s long and close relationship with Tresca see Ring interview, 12 October 1973, 7–9; Lovell in Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 144, and on working-class involvement in protesting the Moscow Trials see “Trial Protest Sent by Mpls Trade Unions: Midwest Organizations Wire Troyanovsky on Moscow Frame-up,” *Socialist Appeal*, 12 March 1938.

As Dewey and his collaborators worked on their report, the delimitation that Trotsky stressed was necessary occurred, albeit not in ways that he wanted. There had always been tensions between Suzanne LaFollette and the Trotskyist cadres who organized the ACDLT and its meetings, although Trotsky himself was somewhat bewildered by the accusations of LaFollette's supposed partiality, which he dismissed as irrelevant. Later, Trotsky referred to "a period of personal conflicts with LaFollette and others."⁷⁸

Such differences may have appeared as little more than private antagonisms, and Trotsky's arms-length relationship with members of the Preliminary Sub-Commission insulated him from the worst that LaFollette and Stolberg put on display. As the hearings in Coyoacan were about to begin, James Burnham conveyed to Cannon some disturbing news, probably alluding to demands that Novack and other Trotskyists keep their distance from the proceedings and its major personnel. "[W]e have had most serious trouble with both LaFollette and Stolberg," Burnham wrote, "and we want to complete the substantial base of the Commission before their return from Mexico, so that they will be unable to cause any trouble." But trouble aplenty there was. The unusually conciliatory and mild-mannered George Novack declared it nearly impossible to work with LaFollette and Stolberg. As early as May 1937, following the highly successful Mecca Temple meeting where Dewey delivered his speech on the Mexico hearings, "Truth is on the March," Novack wrote to Cannon. He was exasperated at the behavior of LaFollette and Stolberg, whom he described as "hysterical and vain, ... ambitious individuals" lacking "practical sense, political experience, or even personal loyalty." Wearying of the endless expenditure of tactfulness and the labors of "mutual friends" to mollify the perpetual disgruntlement of LaFollette and Stolberg, Novack worried that "personal explosions" and "unreasonable actions" were likely from this duo, which could damage Trotsky's defense. Stolberg supposedly boasted of his "anti-Trotskyism as much as his anti-Stalinism," and both he and LaFollette routinely "threatened to dissociate themselves publicly from the Committee and condemn Trotskyites" and their penchant for censorship and sabotage. In fact, the Trotskyists were responsible for much of the less glamorous background work that permitted the Commission to function. Felix Morrow had headed to the country to recover from illness exacerbated by his long hours of such labors, and Pearl Kluger, Martin Abern, and Novack were doing the bulk of the toil associated with organizing Trotsky Defense Committee initiatives, which included the propaganda bulletin

78 Trotsky to Cannon and Shachtman, 29 March 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: May 1937, from Glotzer Papers, PRL; Trotsky to Cannon, 14 October 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 496.

Truth. Novack was obviously fed up, and told Cannon bluntly: “there can be no further collaboration with” Stolberg and LaFollette, these “wild animals I have known.”

There were further difficulties. Trotsky and Al Goldman beat back Commissioner Wendelin Thomas’s insistence that he had the right to issue a special statement condemning the “moral principles” of Bolshevism as a sort of original sin which accounted for the depravity of the Moscow Trials. As Trotsky rightly pointed out, Thomas was entirely free to write anything on Bolshevism that he wished, but it was an abuse of his place on the Commission to use its publication to air his private opinions. This was all the more the case, because the Mexican hearings had not seriously considered the claim that “Stalinism results from Bolshevism.” If they had, Trotsky would have responded at length, both on the irrelevance of the question in terms of the Inquiry’s mandate and on the falsity of the assertion as a proposition relating to the historical development of the Soviet Union and revolutionary politics.⁷⁹

Worsening relations with the liberals at the core of the Commission, who were pulling together the publication of their report, and were thus in a position to determine the content and to select its publisher, created tensions. Abern, Morrow and Novack, the work horses of the ACDLT, were displaced in decision-making, while still expected to arrange funding and perform all necessary administrative tasks required for successful events. Liberal luminaries took the bows and hogged the limelight. Abern reported in late May 1937 that things were bad financially, with the “Trotsky Defense Work naturally absorb[ing] most of the resources” of the New York comrades, “too much of an absorption,” the office manager groused in a private communication, “without finding compensation in other ways.” Stolberg determined that Harper and Brothers was the best press to take on the Preliminary Sub-Commission’s *Report*, copyrighted to LaFollette. The commercial enterprise not only settled on the price of \$5.00 per book (which Abern thought “altogether too high for good circulation”), but expected the ACDLT “to purchase 2,000 copies.”⁸⁰

79 Quotes in the above paragraphs from Burnham to Cannon, 7 April 1937; Novack to Cannon, 21 May 1937, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Trotsky to Goldman, 5 September 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 437–438. See also Leon Trotsky, “The Questions of Wendelin Thomas,” *Socialist Appeal*, 21 August 1937. Trotsky would respond to the Thomas claim that Stalinism was related to Bolshevism with a strong statement of dissent in a pamphlet, Leon Trotsky, *Stalinism and Bolshevism: Concerning the Historical and Theoretical Roots of the Fourth International* (New York: Pioneer, 1937).

80 Shachtman to Trotsky, 11 September 1937, Roll 3, Reel 3346, MS Papers; Morrow to Karsner, 12 May 1937, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Abern to Hansen, 14 May 1937; Abern to Glotzer, 28 May 1938, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: May 1937, from Glotzer Papers, PRL;

The ongoing resistance of Stolberg and LaFollette to any overt Trotskyist participation in preparing the *Report* is the background to Bernard Wolfe's later hostile depiction of Cannon as a man determined to bring a "group of brainy people working on matters vital to him" under "his control." Wolfe was something of a go-between linking Cannon and other leading Trotskyist cadres to LaFollette as she steered the Coyoacan hearings towards publication in the spring of 1937. Cannon apparently "cornered" Wolfe, and insisted he inform LaFollette that a particular passage in the *Report* be worded a specific way. Neither Wolfe nor, apparently, LaFollette, considered the issue of any great consequence, and Wolfe's later recollection could not even recall the substance of the difference. Both LaFollette and Wolfe, however, took some pleasure in delivering back to Cannon a message worded so as to put him decisively in his place. "Under no circumstances would the passage in the Report be worded in his way," Wolfe recalled, noting that Cannon was to be told to "lay off, the Commission was in no sense an arm of the Trotsky party and did not intend to let itself be so used." Cannon responded to receipt of this snub with an earthy disparagement, "Those pigfuckers!" Wolfe thought it all very Stalinist, a harbinger of what he and other "heavy heads" intellectuals would suffer through if Cannon ruled a new workers' state. He was not concerned that he and LaFollette turned what they considered a "trivial" matter into a point of contention with people who had contributed a great deal to building the ACDLT and promoting the Preliminary Sub-Commission of Inquiry. Wolfe and LaFollette considered that Cannon had no business involving himself in the Commission. Wolfe thought Cannon "always more curious than ... he had any right to be about what was going on with Suzanne and her associates. ... The Commission's Report was getting put together, it was going to clear Trotsky, and indict the Stalinists, and that was all Cannon had any call to be concerned about." LaFollette clearly resented any political figure, even one whose "party" had bankrolled and provided much of the sweated labor behind "her" Commission, flexing their "bureaucratic muscles." In Wolfe's opinion, LaFollette and others did "an enormous service to Trotsky and his followers, one they could never have performed for themselves."⁸¹

Trotsky to Cannon, Shachtman, Morrow, et al., 20 April 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky* [1936–1937], 274.

81 Wolfe, *Memoirs of a Not Altogether Shy Pornographer*, 37–39. As late as August 1937 Shachtman wrote to Trotsky that he was working closely with LaFollette and that she "welcomes the collaboration in which, by the way, Rosmer is joining, and there is good reason to believe that as a result the report will be fairly satisfactory." But he could not guarantee that the points that needed to be made about the innocence of Trotsky and Sedov and Stalin's role in the frame-up would be made with appropriate vigor, adding "Naturally,

One of Wolfe's closest confrères in Mexico and New York, Herbert Solow, had a similar attitude. Solow's ACDLT activity was admittedly prodigious, but his relations with Trotsky and his American followers in the United States were often tempestuous. By late 1937/early 1938, Solow's contact with Novack, certainly, and Trotsky, perhaps, was strained to the point of rupture. Trotsky eventually characterized Solow and LaFollette as "friends" destined to remain "political celebrate[s,]" decent human material but dilettantish and mercurial, in need of contact with disciplined workers whose resolve would temper their instinctual capriciousness.

Shachtman had high hopes for major gains through ongoing association with these liberal types. By March 1938, however, Cannon and Trotsky were less sanguine about the prospects of working with this sort of ally in a common organization, even as they recognized the need to create a new agency for the defense of class war prisoners. When Shachtman proposed relaunching a broad labor defense organization encompassing the Trotskyists and those, like Solow, who had participated in the old NPLD, Cannon responded sarcastically: "Oh, yes, Solow threatened to write and expose us in the *Modern Monthly*." Trotsky, agreeing with Cannon, argued that it was necessary to rely on "forces we are sure of." Solow's criticisms, should they arise, could be responded to curtly: "You are not satisfied with us, create your own committee and we will enter into a united front with you – if you are capable of creating a committee without us."⁸²

In the weeks that followed, Solow and Cannon worked together to expose a GPU attempt to fabricate evidence for an espionage case inside the Soviet Union, using an American couple identified as the "Robinsons" or the "Rubens." They were disingenuously represented as having connections to Trotsky. Writing under the pseudonym "Junius," Solow covered the case extensively for the *Socialist Appeal*, unravelling and pillorying the mysterious workings of the GPU and its activity within and use of the American Communist Party, identifying the involvement of several CPUSA members and sympathizers.

At the same time, Solow became increasingly alienated from the activist core of the ACDLT, and eventually his association with the Trotskyists soured bey-

we shall bend every effort to get as firm and thorough a statement of conclusion from the Commission as possible." Shachtman to Trotsky, 30 August 1937, Roll 3, Reel 3346, MS Papers.

- 82 Solow was often at odds with Trotsky over strategic issues in the ACDLT. Quotes in the above paragraphs come from a number of sources. See, for instance, Trotsky to Comrades, 17 March 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 253; Trotsky to Isaacs, 6 February 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, from Trotsky Papers, Harvard, PRL; Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 148–150; "Discussions with Trotsky, II: Defense Organization and Attitude Towards Intellectuals," in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 294–299.

ond repair. Cannon, Morrow, and others finally wrote off “Solow-the-rat and his clique,” a frustrating denouement to years of valuable collaboration, with the Trotsky Defense Committee as the pinnacle. By mid-1938 Solow, adopting a “tactic of abstention,” was moving from Trotskyism to simplified anti-Stalinism. Cannon, dealing directly with Solow’s increasingly vexatious character, came to regard him as “part of a cluttering up of our Committee with trouble-makers who represent nothing and nobody.” By the 1940s, Solow had devolved into an outright anti-communist.⁸³

Dewey was clearly the one liberal who stayed a principled course. True to his particular beliefs, Dewey was resolute in keeping before him the central task of the Commission, assessing the guilt or innocence of Trotsky with respect to the charges arising against him out of the Moscow Trials, basing that judgement on the available evidence. The distinguished philosopher managed to push all other issues, weighted down with ideological freight, to the sidelines. In this right-minded stand Dewey never wavered. Novack regarded Dewey as the key public pillar of the Inquiry into the Charges Made Against Leon Trotsky. As he explained to Cannon, the old pragmatist never retreated in the face of attack, returned two blows for every one received, and provided the Commission “90 %

83 The above two paragraphs draw on many sources. On the byzantine issues of the bizarre “Robinson-Rubens” case see “Cannon Exposes Attempt to Use the ‘Robinson’ Case Against U.S. Trotskyists,” *Socialist Appeal*, 25 December 1937; “‘Robinson-Rubens’ Frameup Prepared for U.S. Spy Scare,” *Socialist Appeal*, 1 January 1938; Junius, “All Trails Lead to Stalinist Camp: The ‘Robinson-Rubens’ Case,” *Socialist Appeal*, 15 January 1938; Junius, “Moscow Admits ‘Robinsons’ Held for ‘Espionage,’” *Socialist Appeal*, 22 January 1938; Junius, “Moscow in Difficulty with Robinson Case; State Department Refused Right to see Arrested Woman,” *Socialist Appeal*, 29 January 1938; Junius, “Jury to Get New Facts in Rubens Case,” *Socialist Appeal*, 19 February 1938; Junius, “Links Poyntz to ‘Robinson’ Spy Frame-Up: Carlo Tresca Says She was Abducted by GPU Agent,” *Socialist Appeal*, 12 February 1938; Junius, “Arrested Photographer A Stalinist Sympathizer: Ossip Garber Held in Rubens Passport Fraud, Is Well Known in C.P. Periphery,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 April 1938; Junius, “Grand Jury Indicts Two in Rubens Mystery Case: Garber, Sharfin Known as C.P. Supporters or Members,” *Socialist Appeal*, 9 April 1938; Junius, “All Trails Lead to Stalinist Camp ...: The ‘Robinson-Rubens’ Case,” *Socialists Appeal*, 15 January 1938; “Passports Issued as Political Favor in Robinson Case,” *New York Times*, 31 December 1937. Rubens-Robinson was an officer of the Soviet military intelligence named Arnold Adamovich Ikal, and was eventually convicted of espionage and sentenced in the Stalinist courts to “ten years without the right of correspondence,” a likely death sentence. His wife, an American citizen named Ruth Marie Boerger, refused American assistance, took up Soviet citizenship, and established herself in Kiev. See Thomas Sakmyster, *Red Conspirator: J. Peters and the American Communist Underground* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 108, 114. Cannon’s final harsh assessment of Solow, arrived at with difficulty, is in Cannon to Morrow, 15 June 1938, Reel 4. JPC Papers. Solow’s political trajectory is outlined briefly in Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 148–150.

of its authority, militancy, and common sense.” Trotsky early singled out Dewey as the exception that proved the rule of liberal capitulation: “The liberal and social-democratic friends showed themselves to be cowards and preferred to remain aside. Only one man from the liberal circles revealed himself as a real man, old Dewey. He is an exception, but all the work cannot depend on his personality: he is old, he can become sick, etc.”⁸⁴

The Trotskyist *Socialist Appeal* peppered its pages with commentary on the ongoing witch-hunt in the Soviet Union. As the frame-up trials aimed at eradicating the entire generation of Bolsheviks who served under Lenin continued, the failure of the liberal-left milieu in the United States to appreciate the significance of such developments⁸⁵ gave Dewey’s role in carrying the findings of the Preliminary Sub-Commission to the wider American public added importance. He delivered the verdict of “Not Guilty” that was fully detailed in the 1938 publication of the *Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, in terms that made absolutely clear how the Moscow Trials were an “extraordinary corruption of the idealistic heritage of the Russian Revolution.”

The implications of this finding are profoundly disturbing ... the present regime [in the Soviet Union] is seeking to identify political opposition to itself with criminal activity against the Soviet Union and its people ... shocking is the systematic use of the Communist parties throughout the world of the vicious ‘Trotskyist-terrorist-fascist’ amalgam as a means of destroying political opposition and even of justifying gross frame-ups and assassinations ... Even in this country, the Communist Party and its labor

84 Novack to Cannon, 21 May 1937, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Trotsky to Cannon and Shachtman, 29 March 1937 (misfiled), Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: May 1937, from Glotzer Papers, PRL.

85 “How GPU Hounds Revolutionists,” *Socialist Appeal*, 11 September 1937; “How GPU Hounds Revolutionists,” *Socialist Appeal*, 18 September 1938; Leon Trotsky, “How London Buro Aids Stalin Frame-Ups By Refusal to Join Probe Commission,” *Socialist Appeal*, 18 September 1937; Jack Weber, “The Wave of Trials in the USSR,” & “The Case of Leon Trotsky,” *Socialist Appeal*, 25 September 1937; Li Fu-jen, “New Stalinist Frame-up Hits China ‘Trotskyists,’” and Victor Serge, “Stalin’s Terror Continues with Envoy’s Recall,” *Socialist Appeal*, 16 October 1937; Leon Trotsky, “Stalin on His Own Frame-Ups,” *Socialist Appeal*, 30 October 1937 & 6 November 1937; Leon Trotsky, “Bertram Wolfe on the Moscow Trails,” *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937; “2 Soviet Diplomats Expose Frame-Ups,” *Socialist Appeal*, 11 December 1937; “Abstract of the Final Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Charges Made Against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials,” *Socialist Appeal*, 18 December 1937; Max Shachtman, “GPU Frame-ups Exposed; Purge Continues,” and Leon Trotsky, “Answers to Questions of Journalists on Verdict of Dewey Commission,” *Socialist Appeal*, 25 December 1937.

and liberal sympathizers have used this strictly amoral tactic, indistinguishable from the tactic of fascism, to slander and persecute opposition, with a resulting confusion and disruption of the forces of economic and political progress which cannot be too strongly condemned.⁸⁶

The final *Report* outlined the reasons behind the formation of the Commission, its procedures and scope, as well as the materials scrutinized and certified. It explored the nature of the charges against Trotsky and Sedov and assessed the credibility of the “capitulators” on whose testimony such allegations rested. Reproducing the remarks of various witnesses in two of the key trials (those of Zinoviev-Kamenev and Pyatakov-Radek), the *Report* weighed the veracity of this testimony against the counter-evidence presented by Trotsky in the Cayoacan hearings, especially with respect to claims of terrorism, sabotage, and agreements with foreign powers. Finally, Dewey and his collaborators also addressed the question of “confessions.” The summary of the Commission’s findings, announced in December 1937, was blunt and unequivocal: “We therefore find the Moscow trials to be frame-ups; We therefore find Trotsky and Sedov not guilty.”

Dewey also took to the airwaves, reading this message over the Columbia Broadcasting system to outlets in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco. Physically fatigued but intellectually robust, Dewey went beyond a simple condemnation of the Moscow Trials, to suggest that in the United States the Communist Party was seeking to create a similar frame-up atmosphere against political opponents in the trade unions. Cannon elaborated on this statement at a late December 1937 mass meeting in New York’s Webster Hall.⁸⁷

Dewey’s broadcasts made “great use” of a fundamental principle of all honest united fronts: that no one is forced to relinquish their “right to free criticism.” Trotsky found some of Dewey’s criticisms of Bolshevism gratuitous, and responded in the spring of 1938 with his rejoinder, “Their Morals and Ours.” He was pleased to learn that those who had worked in the ACDLT, including Dewey and Hook, planned to respond polemically. Writing to Rae Spiegel [Raya

86 “Meeting to Hear Verdict of Dewey Commission; Chairman in Broadcast,” *Socialist Appeal*, 11 December 1937; “Trotsky Innocent, Trials Frame-Ups,” *Socialist Appeal*, 18 December 1937; Farrell, “Dewey in Mexico,” 121–122.

87 Dewey et al., eds., *Not Guilty*, esp. xv; “Meeting to Hear Verdict of Dewey; Chairman in Broadcast,” *Socialist Appeal*, 11 December 1937; “Dewey Broadcasts on Trial; Hits Minneapolis Frame-Up,” *Socialist Appeal*, 18 December 1937; “The Stalinist Frame-Ups from Moscow to Minneapolis,” advertisement for James P. Cannon talk at Webster Hall, *Socialist Appeal*, 18 December 1937.

Dunayevskaya] Trotsky declared that, "An open delimitation from these friends is absolutely necessary." The ACDLT had always been "more reserved" than Professor Dewey when it came to the articulation of political differences, "even too reserved, in my opinion," noted Trotsky. Opponents of the Fourth International, like Dewey and others who served on the Commission of Inquiry, were the more dangerous "the more diplomatic and tolerant we are."⁸⁸

Novack, Morrow, Cannon et al, were acutely aware of this after their experience with Stolberg and LaFollette, and the drift to the right of Solow, who had once aligned himself with Trotskyism. The break with the liberals was now definitive, even though it had unfolded as much by default as by design. If the need to establish a broad labor defense organization was recognized, Cannon and others understood that it would have to be constituted somewhat differently than the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky.⁸⁹

Trotsky was disappointed by the wind up of the ACDLT, but praised the "tremendous work" done by his American comrades. He had nonetheless hoped for a permanent Committee that might continue to expose Stalinist treachery, both inside the Soviet Union and around the world. The criminal assault on Stalin's left opponents by the GPU, including the kidnappings and murders of figures such as Ignace Reiss, Erwin Wolf, Andrés Nin, and Kurt Landau was widely known and might have been easily documented in 1937–38. When Trotsky's son Sedov died in a Parisian hospital under suspicious circumstances in February 1938, Trotsky's desire to see the Commission of Inquiry's work continue was doubtless deepened by his direct, personal loss. But the requirements of delimitation from pseudo-Trotskyist sympathizers in intellectual circles around magazines such as *Partisan Review* and the *Modern Monthly*, not to mention those in the orbit of liberal organs like the *Nation* and the *New Republic*, meant greater distance from the left intelligentsia. This cultural layer was, in any case, largely exhausted by the demands of defense mobilizations, troubled and perplexed by fascist aggression and the looming threat of war, and feeling pressure from Stalinist attacks. Non-aligned intellectuals were often drawn to a popular frontist promise of progressive "unity." Many were repelled, almost instinctually, by Bolshevism's seemingly absolutist commitment to the politics of class struggle.

Acquiescing in what was clearly, by mid-October 1937, the decision of his American supporters to dissolve the ACDLT, Trotsky nonetheless characterized

88 Trotsky to Rae, 29 June 1938, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1937–1938]*, 370–371.

89 "Labor Defense Organization Must Be Built," *Socialist Appeal*, 29 January 1938; Cannon to Ray Spigle, 5 October 1937, "International Files," General Correspondence, 1931–1963, Box 20, Folders 1–9/Reel 26, JPC Papers.

the end of the Committee as a “great failure,” the seeds of which lay in “a fundamentally false policy of our organization.” In a warm letter to Cannon, offering his “best greetings” under the signature of “Your Old Man,” Trotsky insisted that he repeatedly discussed with Shachtman and Novack the necessity to “surround the committee with delegations of workers’ groups in order to create channels to the committee from the masses.” Shachtman agreed, time and time again, as did many other comrades who visited Coyoacan. But Trotsky was now informed that Shachtman himself “opposed” such an orientation and “not the slightest attempt was made to create a regular connection between the workers and the committee.” Instead, emphasis was always on “submission toward the liberals.” Trotsky almost certainly underestimated the challenges posed in creating such working-class support for his defense, and in Minneapolis and among the maritime unions of the west coast, there was of course both knowledge of and backing for the Commission of Inquiry. But in New York, such a base in the unions was far more difficult to build, the Trotskyists having less of a foothold in the weak proletarian quarters of the metropolitan center. For Trotsky, the end of the ACDLT was perceived as “a striking demonstration of the lack of a correct organizational policy,” something that he warned must not happen again in the future, when there would be “many analogous examples of activity.”⁹⁰

Shachtman and Novack formally closed the books on the ACDLT at a New York mass meeting of 2,000 in March 1938, finishing the campaign with a bang

90 Trotsky to Comrades, 20 April 1937; Trotsky to Cannon, 14 October 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 274–275, 496–497; Leon Trotsky to Comrades, “For a Permanent Defense Committee,” 24 December 1937; Leon Trotsky to Comrades, “On *Modern Monthly*,” 30 December 1937; “Letter to the League of Nations,” 31 March 1938, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1937–1938]*, 119–120, 121–122, 311–313; Leon Trotsky, “The Trial of the Dantzig Trotskyists: The Fascist Prosecutor Follows in the Footsteps of Stalin and Vyshinsky,” *Socialist Appeal*, 28 August 1937; Leon Trotsky, “London Buro Aids Stalin Frame-Ups By Refusal to Join Probe Commission,” *Socialist Appeal*, 18 September 1937; Leon Trotsky, “Reiss Diary Exposes GPU Crimes: Young Communists Murdered by Stalinists Firing Squads, Defiantly Cry Out, ‘Long Live Leon Trotsky,’” *Socialist Appeal*, 15 January 1938; Leon Trotsky, “Bertram Wolfe on the Moscow Trials,” & “‘Partisan Review’: A Revolt Against Stalinism Among the Intellectuals,” *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937; Leon Trotsky, “A Letter to the Editor of the ‘*Modern Monthly*,’” *Socialist Appeal*, 11 December 1937, “Trotsky Explains to Kirchwey,” *Socialist Appeal*, 26 March 1938; Ignace Reiss, “Murdered Victim of GPU Reveals Inner Life of Stalin’s Secret Police,” *Socialist Appeal*, 12 February 1938; Leon Trotsky, “The Priests of Half-Truth,” *Socialist Appeal*, 16 April 1938; “Was Leon Sedoff Murdered?” *Socialist Appeal*, 13 August 1938; “Damning Evidence in Sedoff Murder: Trotsky Bares Further Proof of GPU Guilt,” *Socialist Appeal*, 10 September 1938. Stalinists continued to work to deny the decision of the Dewey Commission. See James Casey, “Stalinists Frantically Try to Offset The Findings of the Dewey Commission,” *Socialist Appeal*, 29 January 1938.

rather than a whimper. The large assembly, gathered to protest the most recent Moscow Trial, was addressed by the usual list of speakers, including Suzanne LaFollette and Eugene Lyons. Trotsky would soon denounce the latter as “a miserable philistine,” given to dining at the banquet table of Pioneer Publishers before departing to deliver a lecture to White Guard Russians, in which he explained that the “Trotskyites” were little more than “remnants of a condemned past.” Hoping for divine intervention to be saved “from such friends,” Trotsky now wanted little to do with a good part of the ACDLT’s public face. At the final last meeting of the ACDLT, George Novack outlined the long list of Committee accomplishments, before announcing that it was now in the process of winding down its affairs. Max Shachtman “delivered a spirited rejoinder to those who would seek to make anti-Bolshevik capital out of the debacle of Stalinism” that no doubt inspired some in the audience, but left others on the podium, like Lyons, squirming uncomfortably.⁹¹

8 Social-Democratic Delimitation

Just as many liberals failed to stand fast in defense of truth, the Socialist Party comrades of the entryist Trotskyists also faltered after initially making positive noises about rallying to the banner of the American Committee to Defend Leon Trotsky. The Left-wing of the SP, including the bulk of the radicalizing Young Peoples Socialist League, saw the Moscow Trials for the frame-up that they were. Many Militants, Clarityites, and other social democratic reformists and centrists, at various times, committed themselves to exposing the Stalinist witch-hunt. These included figures such as Norman Thomas and Devere Allen, as well as Chicago socialists like Leon M. Despres, Marian Alschuler Despres, and Francis Heisler, and the California Clarityites, Lillian Symes and Travers Clement. They all made strong statements on the Moscow Trials, contribut-

91 “2,000 Meet to Denounce Trial,” *Socialist Appeal*, 19 March 1938. At the same time Maurice Spector addressed a Toronto gathering of 500 workers. “Spector Speaks on Trials in Toronto,” *Socialist Appeal*, 19 March 1938; “Discussions with Trotsky, II: Defense Organizations and Attitudes Toward Intellectuals,” 24 March 1938; Trotsky to Dunayevskaya, 29 June 1938, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1937–1938]*, 297, 370–371. Eugene Lyons, an editor of *Soviet Russia Pictorial* in the 1920s, and later a correspondent for the Soviet news agency, TASS, eventually became a critic of those journalists covering up the nature of life inside the Soviet Union in the 1930s. He authored *Assignment in Utopia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1937) at the time he was embracing the work of the ACDLT, but then moved quickly to the right, as evidenced in his book, *The Red Decade: The Stalinist Penetration of America* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941).

ing to the defense campaign mobilized by Novack, Shachtman, Morrow, Solow, Abern, Kluger, and others.⁹² But most of the ACDLT's work was carried on by the SP's Trotskyist entryists first and foremost, with their left-wing SP and liberal allies playing a decidedly secondary role.

As the agitation around the Moscow Trials peaked in 1937, with the hearings in Coyoacan and the preparation of the final Dewey Commission *Report*, publication of Trotsky's testimony and the ultimate, 1938-released *Report*, tensions within the SP among centrist leaders, increasingly bellicose right-wingers, and the Trotskyist entryists grew increasingly acrimonious. A parting of the ways appeared imminent. One reflection of this was the growing distance of social democratic elements from the ACDLT. Not a single member of the eventual ten-person Commission of Inquiry was a "native" member of the Socialist Party, as those who had been in the SP prior to the entry of the Workers Party referred to themselves.

The New York Local of the Socialist Party, something of a fiefdom of Jack Altman, who had been identified with the Militant faction, was the center of resistance to the ACDLT. In the fall of 1936, Altman brought Shachtman up on charges for having spoken on the Moscow Trials at Camp Lumen in New Jersey. Controlling the New York Local with an iron hand, Altman blocked proposals that the Party take up the issue of the Trials. City branches were forbidden from holding public meetings that addressed the Trotsky defense campaign. Whenever the ACDLT scheduled a public forum, the Altmanite administration went into overdrive to find ways of altering or postponing the event, and the SP local played no significant role in the meetings at the Hippodrome, Mecca Temple, or Hotel Central that brought Trotsky and Dewey to huge audiences. Burnham later described Altman as exercising a "preventative censorship" over Socialist Party members speaking at meetings of the American Committee. As the Stalinist assault on the Commission of Inquiry escalated during the Coyoacan hearings, Altman upped the ante. Tilting against the conventional wisdom of the Second International, Altman insisted that the Moscow Trials needed to be understood in the context of Trotsky's nefarious past, which he claimed also involved the framing and shooting of workers.⁹³

It is somewhat ironic, then, that some consider the Socialist Party to have been largely responsible for the success of the Trotsky Defense Committee,

92 Heisler and his wife as well as the Despres, visited Trotsky in Mexico in September 1937. See Trotsky to Glotzer, 11 September 1937; 18 September 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky* [1936–1937], 441, 443.

93 James Burnham, "The Politics of Jack Altman," 17 June 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: June 1937, from Glotzer Papers, box 10, File 6, PRL.

going so far as to suggest that the Workers Party entry was initiated to advance the possibilities and prospects of the ACDLT. To be sure, Trotsky and others realized early in their efforts to sustain a campaign to expose the lies at the core of the Moscow Trials that doing this would be exceptionally difficult in Europe. And if winning over mass public opinion required the help of distinguished liberals such as John Dewey, as many, including Trotsky, recognized, then the United States offered possibilities which could “have world-wide impact.” This has led the historian M.S. Venkataramani to speculate that the desire to vindicate Trotsky was the chief motivation behind entry into the Socialist Party in the United States:

The tiny Trotskyist group in the United States had no standing among American liberals. But the Socialist Party of America had a good name among the country’s liberals and its principal leader, Norman Thomas, was not only highly respected but was exceedingly active in the field of civil liberties. If the American Trotskyists could get into the Socialist Party, there was a chance that Stalin’s attempts to grind [Trotsky] into the dust would meet with a ringing protest from American liberals.⁹⁴

Both Trotsky and Cannon, in offhand comments delivered *after* entry when the ACDLT’s work was concluded, lend some credence to this interpretation. Cannon suggested that “it was required” that the Trotskyists be members of the SP to conduct the work of the ACDLT, “surrounded to a certain extent with the protective coloration of a half-way respectable party” and with “closer access to ... liberals, intellectuals, and half-radical people.” Their position within the SP, according to Cannon, meant that “we couldn’t be isolated, as a small group of Trotskyists, mobbed and lynched, as they [the Stalinists and their fellow-traveling supporters] planned to do.” Trotsky made similar remarks: “The fact that in the U.S. we were in the SP and connected with the left-wing, in daily work, convinced them that we could not have connections with the fascists. ... It was covered by the raincoat of the SP, and Thomas was a member of the Committee for the Defense, and we could get Dewey and others.”⁹⁵ Such state-

94 M.S. Venkataramani, “Leon Trotsky’s Adventure in American Radical Politics, 1935–1937,” *International Review of Social History*, 9 (April 1964), 4, 45–46, with these views influencing Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 788, 791; and filtering into Jack Ross, *The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press/Potomac Books, 2015), 380.

95 James P. Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism from its Origins (1928) to the Found-*

ments capture something of the relationship between entry and the ACDLT, but it would be a mistake to see the French turn in America as “a deliberate, cold-blooded maneuver to bring into existence an international commission for the investigation of Stalin’s charges.”⁹⁶

This one-sided, mechanical assessment of the motivations for the entry into the Socialist Party reduces the attempt by Trotskyists to regroup with leftist elements who had joined the SP to fight capitalism and thus advance the struggle to build a mass revolutionary workers party in the citadel of imperialism to a simplistic tale of manipulation and political amorality. In this version, the SP was used by interlopers to align themselves with liberals in order to better build a defense campaign for their leader. Novack establishes, however, that this mobilization, which originated in a movement to secure Trotsky asylum, began “without any special reference to or dependence upon Norman Thomas or the Socialist Party.” Thomas himself, a supporter of the ACDLT who signed a telegram petitioning Mexican President Cardenas to grant a visa to Trotsky, played less and less of a role in the Committee as its work developed, and did next to nothing to launch the Commission of Inquiry. It was not Socialist Party leaders/members gravitating to the ACDLT which gave it momentum, but the active pursuit of prominent liberals and intellectuals (few of whom were members of the SP) by Trotskyist entrists. These connections were developed on the basis of longstanding contacts, and solidifying support from sympathizers such as Sidney Hook.⁹⁷ Contrary to Cannon’s claims, the Trotskyists and their liberal allies were hardly immune from being metaphorically “mobbed and lynched” by Stalinists and their hangers-on among the intelligentsia and journalistic milieu, as the personalist attacks on Dewey showed.

At the point that a split between the entryists and the “native” Socialist Party centrists seemed inevitable, Trotsky pointed out to Cannon that the entry and the defense campaign were two distinct and separate undertakings, with developments in each unfolding according to their particular logic. In early March 1937, for instance, he wrote: “A rupture with Norman Thomas in this situation would be disagreeable and prejudicial from the point of view of the inquiry. But it is impossible to improve a situation determined by general political factors

ing of the Socialist Workers Party (1938): Report of a Participant (New York: Pathfinder, 1972), 241, and 242, where Cannon concluded: “The exposure and discreditment of the Moscow trials was one of the great achievements which has to be accredited to our political move of joining the Socialist Party in 1936.”; Leon Trotsky, “Results of the Entry and Next Tasks,” 6 October 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 484.

96 Venkataramani, “Leon Trotsky’s Adventure in American Radical Politics,” 45.

97 Novack, “How Trotsky Defense Committee was Organized,” 38–43.

through artificial means.”⁹⁸ Trotsky was clearly suggesting that while entry was pursued for broad political purposes, the Committee and its final Commission of Inquiry had a much narrower focus. By the conclusion of the Coyoacan hearings, with Dewey, LaFollette, and Stolberg preparing their final report, the Socialist Party centrists were jockeying to expel the Trotskyist entryists. One reflection of this was the increasingly vociferous criticism, within the Socialist Party, of the Committee/Commission of Inquiry – a case of the social democrats engaging in their own delimitation.

The decentralized Socialist Party always balked at putting its full organizational support behind the ACDLT and the Commission of Inquiry. This prevarication stiffened in the context of the Coyoacan hearings. At its convention in late March 1937, the party failed to take a position on the Moscow Trials and the ongoing initiatives of the Dewey Commission, a point Shachtman awkwardly acknowledged, while clinging to his unrealistic assessment of the SP’s “revolutionary socialist” potential. Asserting that “the whole question of the Soviet Union and its evolution” was at stake, as was “the honor and the future of the world labor movement,” Shachtman pressed the Socialist Party hierarchy to take a firmer stand on the Soviet purges. He insisted that it was “incumbent upon the convention to devote adequate time” to the issue of the Stalinist frame-ups. Yet he had to admit that “the convention ignored” the whole question. Shachtman persisted in presenting the Socialist Party Convention discussions as progressing “towards revolutionary Marxism,” a “distinct step forward towards converting [the Party] into an effective revolutionary instrument in the class struggle.” Trotsky and Cannon were aghast at this, with the former writing in confidence to Shachtman and Cannon that the SP was *not* evolving “into a *revolutionary* party, but into a kind of ILP, that is, a miserable centrist political abortion without any perspective.” The SP gathering’s avoidance of the Moscow Trials established for Trotsky that “the convention had not the slightest revolutionary value. On the contrary, it prepares the party to enter a bloc with the Stalinists.” Trotsky saw this as an indication of how Shachtman’s inclination to “passive adaptation” threatened the whole purpose of entry, and could well lead to “the loss of the members of your own faction,” the genuine Left-wing inside the SP. He concluded that the Trotskyists who entered the Socialist Party must be prepared to reorient themselves by breaking from the centrists and striking out on an independent course.⁹⁹

98 Trotsky to Cannon, 9 March 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 226.

99 Max Shachtman, “Towards a Revolutionary Socialist Party,” *American Socialist Monthly*, 6 (May 1937), 17; Trotsky to Cannon and Shachtman, 25 May 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 306–307.

The Socialist Party's fragmentation and the proclivity for dancing around the Stalinist frame-ups were again displayed at a Philadelphia NEC meeting a month and half later, in mid-May 1937. The Moscow Trials and the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky became a pivotal point of discussion, with revolutionary, centrist, right-wing, and Stalinist-inflected politics all represented. The impossibility of the SP adopting a coherent approach to the Moscow Trials and the Commission of Inquiry was apparent. George Novack brought the issue of the American Committee before the NEC as a special order of business, and heated debate erupted after the Secretary of the ACDLT called for a repudiation of an attack on Trotsky's defenders that had appeared in the *Daily Worker* under the signatures of 36 Wisconsin SP members. Novack argued for continued support for the Committee, a more complete and decisive statement on the Moscow Trials, and increased and sustained Socialist backing for the work of the Commission of Inquiry. Jack Altman, who was emerging as the voice of a rightward, Stalinist-inclined current inside the SP, countered with a resolution passed by the majority of New York City's Executive Committee, which called for disaffiliation from the ACDLT, Altman characterizing the defense campaign as "a mistake from the beginning." Assailing Novack as an emissary of Trotsky, Altman was adamant that he would not be led by a Bolshevik of Trotsky's ilk. Frank Trager, a somewhat freewheeling Clarityite and Labor and Organizational Secretary of the Socialist Party, opposed Altman, vigorously and effectively, prompting Felix Morrow to move a statement that branded the Trials a "frame-up" constituting a "blow at working-class unity," and reasserted the SP's endorsement of the American Committee. The Altmanites were defeated, and their motion to disaffiliate was tabled, but Morrow's counter-motion was gutted, with some on the National Executive backing away from the term "frame-up" in favor of merely labelling the Moscow Trial convictions "unreliable." Shunting support for the Committee on to the proverbial backburner, nothing was clarified except that the fractured Socialist Party lacked a policy on the Moscow Trials and the ACDLT.¹⁰⁰

Both Cannon and Trotsky had no intention of becoming "prisoners of Thomas, Trager, Tyler and Company," concluding that neither Thomas nor the ostensible left-wing Clarityites were capable of sustaining a revolutionary

100 See the account of these developments in James Burnham to Glen Trimble, 17 May 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: May 1937, from Glotzer Papers, Box 10, File 6, PRL; Novack to Cannon, 21 May 1937, Reel 4, JPC Papers. Note, for general statements and some discussion of Trager, Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 128–137; Ross, *The Socialist Party of America*, 380–381; Venkataramani, "Leon Trotsky's Adventure in American Radical Politics, 1935–1937," 29–32.

course. Cannon, writing on 10 June 1937, demanded an immediate reorientation: “we must quit bawling about ‘unity’ and begin to show up the shysters (Zam & Co.) who want to narrow everything down to this hollow concept.” It was time, Cannon argued forcefully, “to bring forward the great issues which set a great sweeping movement into motion.” The Moscow Trials were a case in point. Cannon pointed out that the recent NEC discussion of the “frame-ups” in Philadelphia aroused “the wildest fury” of elements in the Socialist Party leadership, even though the SP’s support for the ACDLT campaign had “never gone beyond the standpoint of timorous liberalism.” This could not simply be excused as the politics of “right wing social bureaucrats.” Altman and his supporters were nothing less than a Fifth Column inside the Socialist Party, bent on a split and a popular frontist reconciliation with the Stalinists of the Communist Party. Trotsky agreed.¹⁰¹

9 Brand Barcelona on Centrist Foreheads: Trotskyism and the Spanish Civil War

Norman Thomas returned from Europe in June 1937. Having spent time in Russia he was, like many a privileged visitor, shown the best face of the Stalinist regime. But Thomas was unable to escape the imbroglio of Spain. Tiring of the Trotskyists, the Socialist Party leader was convinced that they looked at every problem “from the latitude and longitude of Mexico City or whatever might be the temporary home of the exiled Trotsky.” Nothing seemed to have changed during Thomas’s absence from the United States, and he invited George Novack of the ACDLT to his New York office for an awkward conversation. Thomas gave the impression that he was in favor of expelling the Trotskyists, although he might lean to getting rid of the Appeal Institute leaders rather than the entirety of their following. Cannon, Shachtman, and Trimble wrote from California to express fear that there would be “a heavy squeeze on our comrades in the Trotsky Defense Committee” to knuckle under: “hands off the ACDLT,” insisted the trio, adding that the left wing should resist all “interference of Stalinists and semi-Stalinists.”¹⁰² As the Claritytes backtracked on their once-

101 Cannon to Comrades, 10 June 1937, from Trotsky Papers, Harvard University, Reel 4, JPC Papers; “The Situation in the SP and Our Next Tasks,” 15 June 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky* [1936–1937], 334–345.

102 Thomas to Clarence Senior, 19 August 1937, Thomas Papers, quoted in Venkataramani, “Leon Trotsky’s Adventure in American Radical Politics, 1935–1937,” 31; Carter to Cannon, 16 June 1937; Cannon, Shachtman, and Trimble to Carter(?), undated [June 1937], Reel 4,

staunch critique of the Moscow Trials as a line-in-the-sand of socialist betrayal that could not be countenanced, their separation from revolutionary Trotskyism hardened irrevocably, even as some in the entryist "Club" clung to illusions. Alongside this matter of fundamental principle there was another major divide that separated revolutionaries from the amalgam of liberals, Stalinists, right-wingers, and centrists who crossed paths with the Workers Party entryists inside and outside the Socialist Party and the ACDLT in 1937: the slow-motion disaster unfolding in Spain.

From late 1936 on, developments in the Spanish Civil War created serious divisions within the heterogeneous Socialist Party. In September 1936, with Cannon establishing himself on the west coast, he addressed the issue of the Spanish Civil War at a well-attended Socialist Party meeting of 700, which collected \$173 for the Republican cause. At this point, the lines of demarcation were less clear than they soon became.¹⁰³

The Appeal group drafted a platform for the SP's Left-wing in December 1936, in which it discussed the issues posed by Spain in the context of "revolutionary internationalism." The Stalinist Third International and the Social Democratic Second International were both portrayed as barriers to the realization of a revolutionary socialist program, and the Popular Front's strategy of "unity" with the progressive bourgeoisie a guarantee of defeat for the workers' movement. "We must carry on a constant polemic in our press and meetings against the treachery of the People's Front, through which there is now being sacrificed the Spanish proletariat ...," declared one passage. Another noted the necessity of confronting "what the 'neutrality policy' of the Socialist Party of France and the British Labor Party in the face of the Spanish Civil War has revealed to us as to the nature of these two parties." The Appeal document concluded that, "The chief obstacles in the way of the revolutionary development of the party are two: the influence of social-democratic **reformism** and of **Stalinism**. Both of these obstacles are from the right."

A November 1936 National Executive Committee meeting of the Socialist Party, according to the *Socialist Appeal*, "failed grievously" to address a number of critical issues, preeminent among them the Spanish Civil War. Insisting

JPC Papers. Thomas's tone had hardened since late 1936, when his concerns about "the Trotskyite problem in the Party" were posed more diplomatically, described as "a problem of manners and attitudes." See Thomas to Cannon and Trimble, 16 December 1936, Chrono File, January – December 1936, Folder WP: 15–31 December 1936, from Socialist Workers Party Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, PRL.

103 Cannon to Swabeck, 28 September 1936; Goldman to Cannon, 30 September 1936, Box 3, Folder 9/Reel 4, JPC Papers.

that, “The Spanish Civil War, directly or indirectly, is in fact the most burning issue before the working class in every country,” the Appeal group chastised the NEC for neglecting to establish clear guidelines around the key questions of **material support** and **political support** with respect to the insurgent forces and the ongoing struggles in Spain. Material support, argued the Appeal group, should go to all Spanish insurgents fighting against Franco and the counter-revolution, but only those whose policies and practices were consistent with the “the triumph of the workers, the establishment of the workers’ state, and the achievement of socialism” should be endorsed politically. Revolutionaries thus combined a policy of arming all insurgent forces, while simultaneously criticizing governments and other bodies which were thwarting the realization of revolutionary possibility:

If the Spanish workers are defeated, through the false policies of their leaders, the full measure of the tragedy is not to be found alone in the suffering and death of those valiant individuals; the full tragedy would be that they had died **in vain**. And they will have died in vain unless the international proletariat has learned from them – learned not so much how to fire a gun, which can be learned in other ways and is besides never decisive for a revolutionary struggle, but learned the political lessons which alone can guide us to victory. To fail, then, to analyze politically, to criticize politically where criticism is necessary, to squeeze the last drop of political understanding from the Spanish events, is in actuality to be guilty of disservice to the Spanish workers and to the international proletariat, to guarantee in advance that their blood will have been shed to no purpose.

In this context the *Socialist Appeal* found the SP’s NEC resolution on Spain doubly damned. It pandered to pacifist and religious sentiments regarding material aid and eschewed the slogan “**Arms for Spain.**” Noting that such a slogan would have electrified the SP’s ranks and helped raise the level of class consciousness among American workers, this article concluded, “A civil war is not an occasion for Salvation Army methods and a ‘social service’ approach. Food and bandages, very well; but first and foremost, Arms.”

Politically, the Appeal group’s criticism was even more pointed. Virtually every one of the powerful working-class parties and political currents in Spain, which included the Socialists, the Communists, the Marxist Workers’ Party of Unification [POUM], and even the Anarchists, had fallen under the spell of the Peoples’ Front. In the struggle against fascism, the opportunistic pull of “unity” was pushing revolutionaries to endorse a class collaborationist coalition. The

Popular Front was “endangering the struggle of the Spanish workers, is preventing the growth of the revolutionary committees in the army and in the factories, is liquidating the workers’ militia, is repudiating the struggle for workers’ power in favor of the illusory fight for ‘the democratic republic’, [and] is thus preparing in its own way for the defeat of the Spanish revolution.” All of this was sidestepped by the Socialist Party’s NEC, which alluded to the “dangers and limitations of Popular Frontism,” but voiced no actual political criticisms. As would become clear in the months to come, the Socialist Party proved incapable of drawing the balance sheet in the Spanish crisis. Too many of its leading elements, both on the right as well as the ostensible left, were unwilling to confront the Popular Front’s criminal and tragic course in Spain.¹⁰⁴

Ernest Erber, co-founder with Albert Goldman of the *Socialist Appeal*, and National Chairman of the Young People’s Socialist League [YPSL] was dispatched to Spain for two months at the end of 1936. He returned in early 1937 to offer a report on the situation. Going on a national tour, Erber brought the message of “the bankruptcy of the Popular Front” to the Socialist Party, its youth wing, and others. Detailing the “evidence of proletarian revolutionary spirit” that Erber saw exhibited everywhere in Spain, he described the POUM of Catalonia, the Left Socialists in Asturias, and anarchists in and around Barcelona as the potential base for resistance to “the gradual gerrymandering of the workers’ militia, weakening the independent workers’ plenipotentiary committees, and ... undermining working-class self-reliance.”¹⁰⁵

Goldman, Burnham, Morrow, Glen Trimble and others extended this political critique of the Popular Front in the Spanish struggle in late 1936 and 1937. Burnham noted that with the People’s Front slogan of “Everything to Defend Spanish Democracy,” the Communist International was dedicated to the preservation of the bourgeois-democratic state, pointing its guns at both Franco and those seeking to push forward a proletarian revolution. Communists proudly proclaimed that, “the People’s Front government, which is leading

104 The above paragraphs rely on “The Road Ahead: A Draft Platform for the Socialist Party,” & “The NEC Meeting,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (15 December 1936), 4–8. On the importance of the issue of “arms for Spain,” see Swaback to Cochran, 14 December 1936, “General Organizational and Secretarial Correspondence, 1923–1956,” Boxes 15–16/Reels 20–21, JPC Papers.

105 Ernest Erber, “A Picture of Revolutionary Barcelona; Wherever Workers Go They Never Forget to Take Their Guns Along,” *Labor Action*, 19 December 1936; Ernest Erber, “The Battle for Red Barcelona; A Worker Participant Tells the Story of the Heroic July Days,” *Labor Action*, 26 December 1936; “250 Hear Erber Speak on The Civil War in Spain,” *Labor Action*, 30 January 1937; “Danger to Spain Disclosed; National Chairman of YPSL Points Need for Revolutionary Body,” *Labor Action*, 27 February 1937.

the resistance of the Spanish people to the Fascists, has found it necessary to punish as treasonous the disruptive elements of the Trotskyists.”¹⁰⁶ Morrow’s acute analysis, later developed in a book-length study of revolution and counter-revolution in Spain, provided one of the most succinct accounts of the unfolding dialectic of defeat. In Morrow’s reflections on “the Spanish Crisis,” accent was placed on the insurgent masses, who repeatedly proved their willingness to fight for socialism in Spain. But they found themselves constantly compromised by socialist, anarcho-syndicalist, and POUM leaderships. The vacillation or integration into the Popular Front governing state characteristic of these elements left their followers incapable of extending workers’ power and resisting the march of hierarchy and privatization that were the expression of “an end to the anarchy” and a re-establishment of capitalist property forms and social relations.

Albert Goldman hailed the New York Local of the SP for proposing a Eugene V. Debs Column of a projected five hundred volunteers to go to Spain to participate in the struggle. The San Francisco-based *Labor Action* was also supportive. Cannon editorialized that, “The project of the Socialist Party [was] to aid volunteers who want to go to Spain,” and observed that, “Nothing for many years has made such a strong appeal” to committed militants. If the Communist Party leadership at first shrugged off the importance of volunteers, Cannon argued, the communist ranks were nonetheless ready to put their bodies on the line in Spain. “The Debs Column,” Cannon concluded, “presents the acid test of internationalism and the struggle against fascism. There is only one road: straight ahead. American socialism must fulfill its obligation of international solidarity to the embattled workers of Spain!”¹⁰⁷

106 Executive Committee, Communist Club to Socialist Club, University of Chicago, 23 February 1937, “General Organizational and Secretarial Correspondence, 1923–1956,” Boxes 15–16/Reels 20–21, JPC Papers.

107 Felix Morrow, “How the Workers Can Win in Spain,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (1 October 1936), 6–8; “Neutrality and Spain,” Max Sterling, “A Letter from Spain,” & Glen Trimble, “Spain and the Campaign,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (1 November 1936), 1–2, 11–13, 15; Editorial Statement, “POUM and the Spanish Revolution,” & Felix Morrow, “Arms for the Spanish Workers! Only the International Working Class Will Send Arms,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (December 1936), 5–9; James Burnham, “His Excellency’s Loyal Opposition,” Felix Morrow, “Proposed Solutions to the Spanish Crisis,” & Albert Goldman, “Toward Socialist Clarity,” *Socialist Appeal*, 3 (January 1937), 5–8, 10–12; Morrow, “Anglo-French Aid to Spanish Loyalists is a Fraud and Delusion,” *Socialist Appeal*, 16 October 1937; “Spain in Grip of Stalinist GPU,” *Socialist Appeal*, 23 October 1937; Morrow, “Britain Takes Steps to ‘Solve’ Spanish Crisis by Recognizing Franco,” *Socialist Appeal*, 13 November 1937; “96 Volunteers to Serve in Debs Column,” *Labor Action*, 16 January 1937; Cannon, “The Only Road,” *Labor Action*, 23 January 1937. Morrow’s fuller statement is *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain* (New York: Pioneer,

The Debs Column did not live up to these hopes. A poorly organized initiative of Jack Altman – perhaps his last stand as a *bona fide* leader of the Militant Caucus – the volunteer brigade was opposed by pacifists in and around the SP, such as John Hayes Holmes and A.J. Muste. Cannon and Goldman brushed off criticisms by those who claimed that American workers would applaud sending clothing and medicine to Spain, but not arms. Norman Thomas was less ardent, but he ultimately endorsed the idea of a Spanish volunteer corps, which President Roosevelt subsequently lampooned as the Debutante Column. The real problem was Altman. Having initially proposed the Debs Column, he did little to insure its success, and failed to take even elementary steps to protect those idealists who joined it. The Party's NEC refused to endorse the venture, and in the end the endeavor was designated “a terrible flop,” ridiculed, denigrated and, some claimed, sabotaged by forces as disparate as the Hearst press and the Communist Party.

It seems that few of the Debs volunteers were actually transported as far as the Spanish border, and those who made it to the war zone too often found themselves left to their own devices. Most, ironically, hooked up with an Italian anti-fascist unit led by Communists. Two Trotskyist volunteers, Hugo Oehler (who had opposed the entry) and Harry Milton (an Appeal group member whose birth-name was Wolf Kupinsky), were arrested in Valencia. Apparently disillusioned by their experience with the Debs Column, they were looking to leave Spain. Martin Abern suspected the GPU and American Stalinists had a hand in their “being held ... without specific charges.” Milton, secretary of a POUM soldiers' cell, was a delegate to an abruptly cancelled conference. He wrote to Abern that he was stranded and flat broke, owing “a war debt” but unable to “ask for my pay.” But it was Milton's *political* assessment rather than his *personal* situation that was most dire:

Scores of foreign anarchists thrown in jail and held incommunicado. Regional headquarters of anarchist youth has been seized. Barracks of the POUM and anarchists have been taken over and POUM militia-men and officers dismissed and thrown out. Anarchist press is censored to bits and bloody clashes between the government and anarchists in towns outside Barcelona occur frequently. ... Our comrades here are starving. The government offices are filled with Stalinist stools from all over the world looking for political suspects.

1938), while Burnham's is *The People's Front: The New Betrayal* (New York: Pioneer, 1937), with 47–52 addressing Spain.

With Milton still in jail at the end of July 1937, the Trotskyists in the Appeal group did what they could to raise funds to extricate him from his Spanish incarceration, and expressed concern as well about Oehler, for whom they lacked information.¹⁰⁸

It was at this point that Jack Altman came out decisively against the Left-wing, distinguishing himself from centrist-leaning Militants such as Herbert Zam and Gus Tyler. Altman and his chief lieutenant, Sam Baron, sought to push the powerful New York local to the right, cultivating relations with Wisconsin's Paul Porter and others making popular frontist noises and inching toward a rapprochement with Stalinism. Altman's New York followers began marching in peace parades behind the American League Against War and Fascism and sidling up to the Stalinist-led North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. As former Workers' Party members were increasingly shut out of any public Socialist Party role, Altman instigated charges against leading Trotskyist "Club" figures like James Burnham and declared support for the People's Front government of Spain.

108 Goldman, "Toward Socialist Clarity," *Socialist Appeal*, 3 (January 1937), 10–12; Abern to Jack [Weber?], 3 July 1937; Abern to Jack [Weber?], 7 July 1937; To All Local Appeal Groups, "Report of Plenum-Conference: On Solidarity with Wolf Kupinsky (Harry Milton)," 30 July 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: July 1937, all from Glotzer Papers, Box 2, File 4 and Box 10, File 6, PRL; Ross, *The Socialist Party of America*, 382–382; W.A. Swanberg, *Norman Thomas: The Last Idealist* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), 212–213. The *Socialist Call* was chastised for doing nothing to publicize the case of Milton/Kupinsky, who was a member in good standing of the Socialist Party, while the *Daily Worker*, 30 June 1937, apparently identified Oehler and Milton/Kupinsky as fascist agents deserving of execution. See "Where is Kupinsky?" *Socialist Appeal*, 14 August 1937; "Harry Milton Freed in Spain; Returning Here," *Socialist Appeal*, 21 August 1937; "Harry Milton Wounded, Saved From GPU Jail," *Socialist Appeal*, 18 September 1937. Upon his eventual return to the United States, Milton went on a national speaking tour. See "Harry Milton on National Tour," & "Milton Tour Dates," *Socialist Appeal*, 9 October 1937; Milton, "Aragon Front Veteran Tells of Sabotage of Anti-Fascist Fight by People's Front Government," *Socialist Appeal*, 16 October 1937; "Milton and Beatty Speak at Successful Meeting in Chicago," *Socialist Appeal*, 20 November 1937. Hugo Oehler wrote an account of Spanish events, *Barricades in Barcelona: The First Revolt of the Proletariat Against the Bosses' Popular Front* (Barcelona: Bolshevik-Leninists Spanish Section, 16 May 1937), reprinted in *Revolutionary History*, 1 (Summer 1988). Cannon's *Labor Action* offered reports on the Debs Column's work and its important meaning. See "Socialists Enroll Troops for Spain," *Labor Action*, 9 January 1937; Crary Trimble, "United Action and the Debs Column," *Labor Action*, 27 January 1937; "96 Volunteers to Serve in Debs Column" & Cannon, "The Name of Debs," *Labor Action*, 16 January 1937; "Sabotaging Aid for Spain: Hearst and *New Masses* Join Hands to Fight Debs Column," *Labor Action*, 30 June 1937; Crary Trimble, "United Action and the Debs Column," *Labor Action*, 23 January 1937.

Zam and Tyler initially attempted to placate Altman in order to hold the disintegrating New York “Militants” together, but when this proved impossible they took over the editorship of the New York *Call*, and gravitated towards the Clarity group, which they would help to consolidate. The Clarityites, whose left face generally turned to centrist opposition to their Trotskyist counterparts in any struggle with the right, soon rallied their forces in New York by excluding any Workers Party entryists from decision making, championing the POUM in Spain. They thus evaded the hard lessons taught in insurgent lives about the Popular Front, while clearly differentiating themselves from the New York “Club” of Trotskyist entryists, whose considerable appetite for conciliation with the left-wing of the fractured “Militants” was waning.

Cannon, whose contempt for the Clarity group was unequivocal, found the favor of his unvarnished disdain returned by the likes of California’s Lillian Symes. She wrote to Norman Thomas early in 1937: “[I]n the fight ahead, the honesty and integrity of people like yourself are the very weapons with which your opponents [Cannon and the Trotskyites] hope to destroy you. ... You are slated for decapitation – or capitulation – once they get around to it.” To stave off this outcome, as we have seen in the last chapter, the Socialist Party with Thomas at its head and the Altman-Porter-Baron brothers axis at odds with the ostensibly leftist Clarityites, imposed “gag” orders, reneged on commitments, suppressed the Trotskyist press, and liquidated its New York electoral project into the American Labor Party’s La Guardia machine. The Trotskyist entrists opposed all this, but throughout 1937 Thomas and the National Executive Committee found the Spanish Civil War to be the issue that simply would not go away, and which the former Workers Party members hammered on relentlessly. Thomas became obsessed with extricating himself from this dilemma. “The last thing I want to do,” he acknowledged dejectedly, “is to escape from Trotsky by falling, or seeming to fall, into the arms of Stalin.” Spain, like the Moscow Trials, made this a difficult balancing act.¹⁰⁹

Joe Carter wrote to Cannon and others on 24 May 1937 to say that the ongoing work of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky was about “to

109 The above paragraphs draw on a number of sources. For Trotskyist statements on Spain and the reconfiguration of the Socialist Party see “The Appeal and the Left Wing,” “Draft Resolution on the Spanish Situation,” & “Draft Resolution on Revolutionary Class Struggle vs the People’s Front,” *Socialist Appeal*, 3 (February 1937), 13–15, 21–26; “The Crisis in the Party,” *Socialist Appeal*, 3 (March 1937), 29–36; James Burnham, “The Politics of Jack Altman,” 17 June 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder: WP, June 1937, from Glotzer Papers, Box 10, File 6, PRL. Symes and Thomas quoted in Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 217–218.

take second place” to a campaign around the Socialist Party’s Philadelphia NEC resolution on Spain. Described as “shameful,” the SP’s stand on the Spanish Civil War avoided any critique of Moscow’s sabotage of worker insurgents. This was soft-peddled in Shachtman’s *American Socialist Monthly* article, which noted that “shortcomings” in the SP position involving support for the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, could be rectified by petitioning the National Executive Committee, which he proceeded to do.¹¹⁰

Cannon and Trotsky had no interest in trying to pressure the SP hierarchy, but instead pushed vigorously to drive a wedge between revolutionaries and those who conciliated the class-collaborationist, defeatist course set by the Soviet leadership.¹¹¹ With all the evidence on Stalinist malfeasance and state-sanctioned murder from revelations about the Moscow Trials, Cannon was disgusted by the willingness of the Socialist Party’s tops to ignore the Comintern’s role in actively subverting and contributing directly to the military suppression of the revolutionary impulses of the Spanish working class. He pointed out to his New York comrades that even mainstream liberal magazines like the *New Republic* were white-washing the dastardly work of the “Stalinist People’s Front bloodhounds” during the tragic May Days in Barcelona.

The stage had long been set for this kind of murderous sabotaging of the Spanish struggle. Arthur Koestler, then a Communist, recalled that while the Comintern was committed to fighting fascism in Germany, Italy, and Spain, its main concern was “the Trotskyite heretics and socialist schismatics.” Under the Popular Front in Spain, Communists continued to target Trotskyists, ostensible Trotskyists, and anarchists. “The Trotskyites are just as dangerous as the armies of fascism,” pontificated one Comintern spokesman in Spain, while another identified “Fascists, Trotskyists, and uncontrollables” (Anarchists) as “enemies of the people.” The press of the International Brigades declared unequivocally that Trotskyists were using “the same methods of combat which served the

110 Shachtman, “Towards a Revolutionary Socialist Party,” 17; Carter to Comrades, 24 May 1937, Reel 4, JPC Papers.

111 Cannon’s *Labor Action* promoted the Revolution in Spain from its first issue, and as time wore on was increasingly critical of Stalinist Popular Frontism in action in Spain. See, for instance, “Heroic Spanish Workers and International Troops Hold Fascist Beasts at Bay,” *Labor Action*, 28 November 1936; “Revolutionary Truth and the Spanish Situation,” *Labor Action*, 12 December 1936; “Capitalist Conspiracy Against Spanish Workers as British and French Try to Dismember Country,” *Labor Action*, 19 December 1936; Alfredo Rojas, “They Are Organizing a Pogrom against the Revolutionary Forces in Spain! Stalinist Traitors Set Stage to Turn Machine Guns on POUM and CNT,” *Labor Action*, 6 February 1937; “Act to Crush Militant Labor Group in Spain: Support ‘Moscow Trial’ Technique to Split Workers’ Ranks and Slaughter Revolutionists,” *Labor Action*, 20 February 1937.

saboteurs, spies, and terrorists condemned by the Moscow trials” against the heroic anti-fascist fighters in Spain.¹¹²

Small wonder that civil guards, an elite unit of the Republican state, attacked anarchists and affiliates of Andrés Nin’s POUM during the Barcelona May debacle. Both of these dissident contingents of armed insurgents refused to completely subordinate themselves to the pro-capitalist Popular Front government. Nine hundred militant workers were reported killed and 2,500 wounded as the Communist Party rationalized the butchery and parroted Moscow Trial-like claims that its leftist opponents were agents of Franco. Although this was not known at the time in the United States, Nin, a former member of the International Left Opposition who broke with Trotsky in 1935, was arrested in mid-June 1937 along with most of the POUM leadership. Held in a Stalinist prison camp outside Madrid, the Spanish revolutionary was tortured and eventually executed. The POUM, in true centrist fashion, had optimistically ignored the ominous signals that a Stalinist-organized repression was in the making. The price for this failure was the organization’s rapid demise, the loss registered in the disappearance of half of its Central Committee, two-thirds of its Executive, and the consequent disarray of hundreds of cells, thousands of members, and dozens of POUM newspapers in Catalonia.

Cannon was thus rightly and sharply critical of Shachtman’s appeal to the NEC to reconsider its position on Spain as not only sycophantic in tone but, like the overall orientation of the New York “Club,” “utterly false and, if continued, ... fatal.” A conciliatory approach, which could only demoralize the party’s left wing, threatened everything that had been gained during the entry. As the Clarityites maneuvered to broker “unity,” putting pressure on the New York Trotskyists to tone down criticism on Spain in exchange for a “truce” guaranteeing no expulsions of Workers Party entrists for six months, Cannon responded vigorously. He warned that the time was past due “to prepare and harden left wingers for the inevitable rupture.” Labelling Altman a tool in the hands of the Stalinist apparatus, Cannon saw “nothing doing on six months” of peaceful co-existence, nor even “six days.”

112 Arthur Koestler, *The God That Failed*, ed. Richard Crossman (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1950), 29; Francisco Anton, “Trotskyism – The Mortal Enemy of the People’s Front,” *Communist International*, 15 (January 1937), 87; Anton, “Trotskyists in Spain – Open Agents of Fascism,” *Imprecor*, 18 (17 May 1938), 548–552; R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 141.

The revolutionary socialists need a militant lead; they need the truth without diplomatic varnish; above all they need the conviction that we have a leadership concerned with great issues and able to fight for them with assurance and confidence. The Moscow Trials and the Barcelona massacre have drawn a line of blood between their authors and all their defenders and the revolutionary workers. On that basis we must rally our forces.

We must take the political offensive all along the line. Instead of slackening the Spanish Campaign we must intensify it, and **sharpen its tone!** ... No common resolution with people who are not **passionately** supporting the Barcelona workers and condemning their persecutors.

Supplementing his outrage with some practical advice, Cannon wrote Carter in June 1937: "As a detail, I take it for granted that you will call a **mass caucus** immediately." There you should boldly proceed to raise hands "**to defend the revolutionary wing of the Party against the conspiracy of the Stalinist tools and agents.**" The fight had to be waged "in such a way that the miserable contemptible centrists are forced to show their colors" rather than mask their retreats from principled revolutionary positions in "negotiations and ambiguous formulas which enable them to hide until the opportune moment to betray, as at Philadelphia." There must be no let-up in the struggle to re-establish the Trotskyist press, Cannon stressed, and an intimate, daily, fighting communication must be maintained between the "center and the field." He closed with the hyperbolic declaration that, "A stenographer-comrade now is the equivalent of a machine-gun in Barcelona."

Cannon's ire was not only directed at Altman, Paul Porter, and the like. He struck out as well at the centrists for whom Shachtman, Burnham, Carter and others still seemed to hold some misplaced political allegiance: "What a bunch of scoundrels this Clarityite leadership is anyway. Instead of helping them to shift out from under the Spanish resolution, we should brand it on their foreheads." Trotsky concurred, commenting that, "The Moscow Trials and the Spanish Civil War give us all the necessary weapons with which to reconquer our independence on a higher historical level."¹¹³

¹¹³ The above paragraphs draw on many sources, including the concentrated correspondence: Carter to Comrade, 24 May 1937; Carter to Cannon, 26 May 1937; Burnham to Cannon, 5 June 1937; Carter to Cannon, 8 June 1937; Cannon to Carter [no date, 10 June 1937?]; Cannon to Comrades, 10 June 1937; Burnham to Cannon, 15 June 1937, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Trotsky to Shachtman and Cannon, 25 May 1937; "The Situation in the SP and Our Next Tasks," 15 June 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936-1937]*, 306-307, 334-335. On Andrés Nin, the

In New York, the claim was that there were no fundamental differences, and that Cannon had overreached, in Burnham's view, with diatribes inscribed in an "adventurous, insulting, and half-thought out manner." Especially irksome was Cannon's recourse to words like "scoundrel," "bloodhounds," "sons of bitches," and "shysters," or adjectives such as "miserable" and "contemptible." Lecturing Cannon on the "tone" appropriate to "winning persons to a revolutionary position," Burnham argued that it was "immaterial ... whether one thinks Altman or Zam to be a son of a bitch; I am very anxious that he should agree with me on the question of Spain, and act accordingly. Nor do I care how often he writes 'Bolshevik' with capital letters; I would be quite content for him not to use the word 'Bolshevik'. It does not even seem to me important whether anyone is 'passionately supporting the Barcelona workers' if I am to write common resolutions with him; his passions are his own affair." Calm, logical argument, Burnham implied, carried more authority than dismissive invective and "trying to brand" political error on anyone's forehead. Burnham defended Shachtman's tone as being careful, holding in abeyance the "bluntness" that might prove necessary as "Party developments become more open." He still saw prospects, however slim, of winning the Socialist Party and securing it for revolutionary ends, insisting that "we must leave a road open" to such an outcome. This would not happen, he suggested, if Cannon persisted in lumping together "all opponents as 'Stalinist agents,'" which the academic indicated was perhaps "copied from T's recent habit of calling everyone who disagrees with him" a GPU operative. Repeating this caution, Carter wrote to Cannon that the New York "Club" had received a wire from "Barnie" [Mayes/Moss?] calling for a denunciation of "infamous agents of Moscow and Spanish hangmen," and that, "We could not understand nor agree with this advice." For his part Cannon, convinced that Shachtman, en route to San Francisco, would concur with him "on the line of

POUM, and the tragic May events of Stalinist suppression, assassination of anarchist leaders, and the POUM's retreat, the literature is extensive, including Pierre Broué and Emile Témime, *The Revolution and the Civil War in Spain* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2008), esp. 265–318; Felix Morrow, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain* (New York: Pioneer, 1938), esp. 78–141; Leon Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution (1931–1939)* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973); and the powerful indictment in George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938). Note as well the insightful contemporary report of Charles Orr, who edited the POUM's English language publication, *Spanish Revolution*, an excerpt reprinted in 1917: *Journal of the International Bolshevik Tendency*, 18 (1996); and Lois Orr, *Letters from Barcelona: An American Woman in Revolution and Civil War* (London: Palgrave, 2009). For a contemporary statement by American Trotskyists see "The Situation in Spain Today," and "Truth About Barcelona's May Days: Sensational Document on the Stalinist-Separatist Plot to Crush Labor," *Socialist Appeal*, 21 August 1937.

intransigent struggle, not because I am such a fire-eater, but because there is no other possible way under the circumstances,” agreed to begin to make plans to return to New York.¹¹⁴

It was critical to propagandize on Spain because the Altmanite right-wing was going on the offensive in New York membership meetings, monopolizing the floor with open declarations of a caucus war aimed at expelling the Trotskyists. The worsening Spanish situation was being presented in a “horrible jumble” that congealed an embittered attack on the Communist International with a view of the POUM, anti-Franco anarchists, and the Barcelona events that regurgitated Stalinist propaganda. Sam Baron, fresh from a visit to Spain, spoke at one tumultuous meeting in New York in June 1937, concluding on a strong note of support for the Loyalist government of Juan Negrín y López, a particular *bête noir* of the Spanish anarchists. Negrín, a conservative social democrat not unlike Altman and Baron in the United States, fought against the left-wing in the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party, or PSOE. Emerging victorious, Negrín assumed the powerful position of Minister of Finance in the Spanish government in September 1936; nine months later he was named Prime Minister. Architect of what Pierre Broué and Emile Témime designate “the strong state,” Negrín, as much as any other single figure on the Republican side, neutered revolutionary initiatives by squashing collectivization, reconstituting private property, and virtually outlawing political opposition. He transferred the Spanish gold reserves to the Soviet Union in return for arms to conduct the war. The weaponry was then used to impose law and order in the Republican-held areas of Spain once under the control of independent armed militias of worker insurgents affiliated with anarcho-syndicalist trade unions and radical parties. Negrín also sought to stabilize and secure the place of the Catholic Church in Spain. Relying on the Communists to curtail anarchists and POU-Mists, the new government’s policies meshed perfectly with the Stalinist Popular Front. Committed to defeat what *The Times* in London called “violence from below,” Negrín’s strong state relied on violence from above: hierarchy in the armed forces was restored, with soldiers who “abused” officers subject to the death penalty. Almost half of the galleries in the new Barcelona Model Prison were set up to accommodate leftists of the POUM and the anarchist CNT (National Confederation of Labor). Support for Negrín, anathema to the Trotskyists, was bread-and-butter for the Altmanites. The meeting where Baron spoke featured all manner of bureaucratic procedural maneuvers and Trot-

114 Burnham to Cannon, 15 June 1937; Carter to Cannon, 21 June 1937; Cannon to Carter, 9 June 1937 (?), Reel 4, JPC Papers.

skyist speakers, including Burnham and Spector, were effectively shut down. One right-winger ostensibly physically assaulted a rank-and-file Trotskyist, or, in another telling, Baron's remark that Trotskyists were "the allies of the 5th column of Franco" erupted in hooliganism, "a provocation justly answered." Little could be done in this climate, although in Indiana the state SP convention adopted Trotskyist resolutions on Spain, and similar support was likely in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, New Jersey, and Illinois.

Burnham, depending on his mood, oscillated between considering Cannon's California-based agitational paper, *Labor Action*, as "ill-starred," "ill-advised," and "ill-begotten," and regarding it as a useful adjunct to work in the SP and elsewhere. He asked Cannon, "Can you get out an issue [focused on Spain] of *Labor Action*?" proposing that recent articles by Felix Morrow and himself could be "published as written." Burnham wanted to use the west-coast paper to push the Spanish campaign "harder throughout the Party." If those thirsting for a fight with the Trotskyists then wanted to "crack down on *Labor Action*, let it be absolutely clear that they are doing so because of the Spanish issue." Cannon was on the same wavelength, and was doing his best to prepare a couple of issues of the paper before returning to New York. The next number, "if it ever comes out," Cannon wrote to Carter, "will be a special Spanish number."¹¹⁵

Things came to a head as the SP leadership resolved to extricate the revolutionary thorn in its tender social democratic flank. While Burnham and Shachtman continued to be conciliatory, the experience of the Dewey Commission, the Moscow Trials, and the Spanish Civil War hardened Trotskyist resolve to fight it out in the Cannon, Swabeck, Dunne camp, which was supported by Abern, Glotzer, and others who had never been keen on entry. The open hostility of the SP's Altman-Baron wing toward the Trotskyists forced Thomas's hand and put an uncomfortable amount of pressure on the Clarityite centrists.

This rapidly-deteriorating context also settled the dispute in a nine-months long war of position separating Cannon from so many in the New York "Club", a conflict that also sowed seeds of discord throughout strongholds of the Appeal group, such as Chicago. Even Burnham, who as late as mid-June 1937, was still lecturing Cannon that Altman and Company were not simply Stalinists,

¹¹⁵ The above paragraphs draw on Burnham to Cannon, 5 June 1937; Cannon to Carter, 9 June 1937; Burnham to Cannon, 15 June 1937, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Glotzer to Carter, 9 June 1937 and Burnham to Glotzer, 12 June 1937, "General Organizational and Secretarial Correspondence, 1923–1956," Boxes 14–15/Reels 20–21, JPC Papers. On Negrín and the strong state see the brief, illuminating commentary in Broué and Témime, *The Revolution and the Civil War in Spain*, 313–315; and, more generally, Morrow, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain* and Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution*, detailing collaboration with Stalinism.

and that the Clarityites included people who could be won to revolutionary Trotskyism, was forced to abruptly change his tune when faced with Altman-orchestrated charges that resulted in the New York professor's one-year suspension from the Socialist Party.

In a 17 June 1937 document, "The Politics of Jack Altman," Burnham marveled at the "general staff of the Right Wing." This Altman-assembled faction included Thomas, significant sections of SP delegations from New York, Wisconsin, and Massachusetts, and an important contingent of trade union bureaucrats. It also encompassed, according to Burnham, religious and not-so-religious pacifists; municipal "sewer socialists"; "outright Stalinists calling for an 'international People's Front' and a holy war against fascism"; Farmer-Laborites; and Fabians. This unprincipled combination, patched together by Altman, was mobilized adroitly, with the Spanish crisis as its centerpiece:

It takes a powerful force to weld together such a medley. And they have found it. All of them are willing to bury their individual hatchets for the sake of wielding a common hatchet against the irresistibly growing revolutionary tendency, the tendency which they jointly regard as their mortal enemy. What, after all, are a few principles in the face of the threat of revolutionary Marxism? An admirable lesson can be drawn from the readiness with which bourgeois-democrats and all varieties of reformists and Popular Frontists in Spain dropped their disputes in order to man the guns jointly against the revolutionary workers of Catalonia. It is in no respect an accident that every section of the Right Wing from Porter to Thomas defends and supports the butchers of the Catalonia workers.

Claiming to oppose the Popular Front as class collaboration, Altman was in favor of the Spanish version:

... it is the white-hot Spanish issue which best cuts away the screen from Altman's 'anti-Popular Frontism'. From the beginning, Altman's anti-Popular Frontism in words has meant, in practice: full support, material and above all **political**, to the Spanish Popular Front government. Murray Baron, at a membership meeting last November, characterized as **strike-breakers** those who criticized the Spanish government. Altman defended the government politically at a membership meeting in December and at a prior weekend Conference (where he also defended Blum). The slightest proposal for material aid for the POUM and the Anarchists meets at once with Altman's club. Sam Baron, Altman's emissary in Spain, ended his radio address in Madrid with the slogan, "Long Live the Republic!"

The Altman administration issues blanket orders that no Party member speaking at NAC meetings is permitted to criticize the Spanish government or its policies.

The Barcelona events make the whole matter much clearer. Here, with a line of blood drawn between the revolutionary workers on the one side and the Government on the other, Altman takes his stand. And he takes it alongside of the butchers of the workers. At the Philadelphia NEC meeting, giving his interpretation to the NEC resolution on Spain, he praised it because, he said, it gave the Party a basis for action against those members who criticize the Government – this, it should be kept in mind, during the very days of the Barcelona events. At the June 4th membership meeting, Sam Baron made his ‘report’ on Spain. Baron went the whole way.¹¹⁶ Before the membership, he relayed the treacherous Stalinist slander of ‘Franco’s Fifth Column’ existing in Catalonia in the organizations of the POUM and the Anarchists. The belated action of the Catalonia workers to defend their most elementary rights against the intolerable provocations of the bourgeois coalition People’s Front government was, in Baron’s view, the uprising of the spies and agents of France. The massacre of the workers was, to him, the wholly justified weeding out of **agents provocateurs**. Baron went further: and, though ‘regretting’ the ousting of Caballero, called nevertheless for all support for the Negrin government – the pawn of Stalin-Blum-Eden.

Burnham did not describe Altman as a “son of a bitch,” but his dissection of the former Militant chieftain’s politics was of a piece with Cannon’s private excoriation. As Burnham observed “The road of Altman is the road toward Stalinism. This triumph of Altman means, in its consequence, the triumph of Stalinism. ... It is idle and unimportant to speculate on whether or in what sense Altman is an ‘agent’ of Stalinism. His course, and the course of his supporters, represents in its broad and central development the influence of Stalinism within the Party. Here then,” concluded Burnham, “is the root of the present crisis in the Party. The alternatives of the revolutionary or reformist paths are posed concretely as: Stalinism vs Marxism.”

Burnham did not stop at pillorying Altman. He moved, as had Cannon, logically on to the Clarityites. While Burnham could instinctually embrace a notion

116 Ironically, given Baron’s importance in defending Spain’s popular frontist government, he would later be imprisoned in Spain, reported to be confined by the Stalinist GPU. His release was secured by “massed protest of working-class organizations throughout the world.” See “Sam Baron Released,” *Socialist Appeal*, 27 November 1937.

of “truce,” he stressed that in the face of the aggressive and politically destructive Altman offensive, any attempt to maintain a false equilibrium in the Socialist Party had to be taken to task for simply making concessions to the right. This facilitated an unambiguous attack on the left, which once again paralleled developments in Spain:

In its organizational maneuvers, Clarity, also, remains true to its political conceptions. Its attitude toward the Party crisis is exactly comparable to and bound up with its attitude toward the Barcelona events. In Barcelona it is trying to straddle the barricades; it ‘protests’ both against the ‘irresponsible’ workers and against the ‘repressive measures’ of the Government; it refuses to plant its feet on one side or the other. In the United States it tries to straddle the political gulf between the revolutionary left wing and Altman. ... Barcelona is far away, and it is easier to straddle when only words are in question. But Altman and the left wing are, unfortunately for the Clarity leadership, very palpable facts. Clarity must choose: a fight with the revolutionary left wing against Altman’s drive to destroy the revolutionary tendency in the labor movement; or a fight alongside Altman against the left.

Burnham’s conclusions about the road ahead for the Trotskyists inside the Socialist Party thus finally dovetailed with Cannon’s: “we call for a sharp and uncompromising counter-offensive, and for [Altman’s] smashing political defeat. We propose to conduct our fight on the only possible basis: ... the clear, internationalist program of revolutionary Marxism. We call upon every active Party member who is resolved, with us, to forge in this country a great revolutionary party, and to defeat the efforts of reformists and Stalinists to strangle and smother it, to join with us.” If there was, in this formulation, a door to the Socialist Party itself becoming that party of revolution, it was clearly only very slightly ajar.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ The above paragraphs quote extensively from James Burnham, “The Politics of Jack Altman,” Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: June 1937, from Glotzer Papers, Box 10, File 6, PRL. Swabeck, who like Burnham, Cannon, and Shachtman, now agreed there must be “No more concessions!” and that the fight against the right-wing had to take a more politically offensive orientation, elevating Spain to prominence, remained convinced in late June that, “While preparing the left wing for the rupture, nevertheless there is no reason to give up the fight for the party framework, and less reason to decide in advance that this cannot be done, or it is not worthwhile.” Swabeck to Cannon, 23 June 1937, Reel 4, JPC Papers. Burnham wrote to Glotzer at the end of June 1937, indicating: “On the need for sharp, independent, and uncompromising struggle I gather that

The opening to any possibility of an evolution of the Socialist Party in a revolutionary direction was slammed shut in the summer of 1937, as we have seen in the previous chapter. The Altman-Thomas campaign of expulsion culminated in a Socialist Party decision at a rump meeting of the Central Committee to finally give the Workers Party entryists their walking papers. The Trotskyists responded by resuming publication of the *Socialist Appeal*. The first new number of the Workers Party entryists contained a lengthy Left-wing manifesto on the Party crisis that Cannon had been pushing for since mid-June 1937. Spain and the Moscow Trials/American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky were featured in the assessment of the crisis in the Socialist Party. It was now known that Andrés Nin had been executed by the GPU in a brutal attempt to extract a Moscow Trial-like confession of the Spanish leader's supposed role as a "Trotskyite" agent of fascism. Cannon and Shachtman joined Carlo Tresca and others on the podium at a 13 August 1937 Irving Plaza mass meeting to denounce Nin's murder. The next day the *Socialist Appeal* hit the streets, headlined "Socialist Party is Split in New York Expulsions." In appealing to those left-wingers who were still formally aligned with the Socialist Party/YPSL, the Trotskyists proclaimed, "No one can avoid the issue of Spain."

The May events in Barcelona made concrete the abstract revolutionary propositions the Trotskyists had been espousing inside the Socialist Party for months. Fighting Franco could only be successful if the struggle mobilized the energy of the oppressed masses, which was best done by advancing the revolution initiated in July 1936. This uprising, which spontaneously transcended the pro-capitalist framework of the Republican government, could only move forward against that Popular Front formation and its Stalinist enforcers who, in seeking to guarantee capitalist property and its hegemony, "massacred the workers in cold blood" in Barcelona. This act of counter-revolutionary repression was facilitated by the "timidity, and outright betrayal" of the work-

all of us are in agreement," and that "The provocations of the Right Wing and of Clarity seem to demand replies that don't belong inside the same party. Moreover, Altman's speed doesn't seem to leave any choice." Yet Burnham still made the case that "we still have some business to do with the framework of the Socialist Party," and cautioned against a precipitous split, which he suggested could be the outcome if Cannon's communications were taken to their logical conclusion. See Burnham to Glotzer, 28 June 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: June 1937, from Glotzer Papers Box 2, File 6, PRL. See also Carter to Selander, 17 June 1937, "General Organizational and Secretarial Correspondence, 1923–1956," Boxes 14–15/Reels 20–21, JPC Papers. Abern was content to stress that the Trotskyist ranks were solidified, but he continued to hold strong anti-Cannon views. See Abern to Glotzer, 23 June 1937, "General Organizational and Secretarial Correspondence, 1923–1956," Boxes 14–15/Reels 20–21, JPC Papers.

ers' organizations, principally anarchist, CNT, and the semi-Trotskyist centrist POUM. *Socialist Appeal* argued that only a resolute Marxist leadership committed to not only defeating the fascists, but pushing beyond the limits of bourgeois legality to open the road to socialism could politically rearm insurgent workers with the revolutionary resolve that would carry the Spanish Civil War to victory.

Yet the Socialist Party offered only a lethal obfuscation, with "the pitiful leadership of the NEC and of Clarity" shutting its eyes to the obvious political lessons of recent events in Spain. Claiming to represent a left perspective, Clarity deplored "in one breath 'all uprisings against the [Spanish] Government' and in the next, 'all suppression of the workers.'" This centrist stand, which the *Socialist Appeal* likened to "Clarity ... trying to 'postpone' the conflict with the Party, by not fighting against the Right Wing and concretely for and alongside the revolutionary tendency, turns over control to the Right Wing." Clarity was left to do the bidding of the Right Wing until they were no longer useful, at which point Zam, Tyler, and Company would be shunted aside, just as Francisco Largo Caballero (their favorite Spanish leader) was after reluctantly presiding over the May 1937 repression. Caballero, having served his purpose, was replaced by Negrín, a figure far more in tune with the Stalinists and bourgeois-democratic defenders of capitalism.

The *Appeal* "Manifesto" made parallel arguments about the Moscow Trials and the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky, detailing how Altman and other SPers functioned as stooges of Stalinism and obstructed the struggle to expose the Moscow frame-ups. But the Left-wing promised: "We will brand the destroyers of October, the executioners of the Russian Revolution and the generation that made it, the banner bearers of social patriotism and the betrayers of the world revolution, for what they are. To be silent in the face of betrayal is to share in that betrayal."¹¹⁸

This vociferous left critique, reinforced by the events on the ground in Spain, was countered by Altman. He dug in his heels and secured victories and concessions in a relentless drive to expel American entryists from the Socialist Party. As the Trotskyists published a "Roll of Honor" listing those driven out of the

118 The above paragraphs draw on "Socialist Party Split in New York Expulsions: 'La Guardia Socialists' Oust Left-Wingers at Rump Meeting of Central Committee," "GPU Lynches Andrés Nin," "Mass Meeting: Protest the Lynching of Andres Nin in Spain!" & "A Manifesto to the Members of the Socialist Party," *Socialist Appeal*, 14 August 1937; Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 218; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 129–130; Ben Herman, "Caballero at the Helm," *Socialist Appeal*, 2 (1 October 1936), 10–11. Also for later revelations "Socialist Bares Barcelona Frame-up Against POUM; Tells How Militants are Persecuted by the Stalinist GPU," *Socialist Appeal*, 6 August 1938.

Party in New York, SP branches across the country fractured. The YPSL, split by the actions of Altman and others, was largely regrouped by Cannon, Shachtman, and young left-wingers such as Hal Draper and Ernest Erber. Linked to Clarityite capitulation, all of this pushed the dissident entrust component of the Socialist Party, along with its Left-wing and youth supporters, into a call for a Convention that would rally the revolutionary remnants of the inclusive Party of Norman Thomas. That Party now looked to be excluding more than it was embracing. Cannon hit the road to argue the Appeal group's case. One place he visited was Quakertown, Bucks County, Pennsylvania. His performance, described by a local reporter as "a brilliant talk," inspired revolutionary socialists to "support the convention call of the left wing." Shachtman aptly described Clarityite Gus Tyler as a "purveyor of arms and ammunition to Altman." The uncompromising stance of the Trotskyists in the face of a wave of mass expulsions during their last weeks in the Socialist Party, left Cannon and others operating as an external Left-wing opposition to Thomas and Altman, Zam and Tyler. It signaled their intent to chart a path of organizational independence and revolutionary renewal. The foundation of this separation had been laid with positions secured in struggles around the Trotsky Defense Committee and the Spanish Civil War.¹¹⁹

119 "Roll of Honor," *Socialist Appeal*, 21 August 1937; "YPSL Split in NY: More Ousted by Altman," *Socialist Appeal*, 28 August 1937; John F. Dwyer, "Bucks County Local with Left Wing After Hearing Cannon Debate Felix and Sandwick," *Socialist Appeal*, 30 October 1937; Max Shachtman, "The Politics of Gus Tyler: A Genuine Case of Rotten Liberalism in the Party: How The Centrist Leadership of the Clarity Group Reacts to the Crisis Confronting the Socialist Party at Decisive Stages of Struggle," & Felix Morrow, "Spanish Unions Join Pact Against Stalinist Reaction," *Socialist Appeal*, 28 August 1937; "Party Branches Protest Mass Expulsions," *Socialist Appeal*, 28 August 1937; "Left Wing Will Not Allow Itself to be Gagged by the Party Bureaucracy: Declaration by Albert Goodman for the Left Wing at the Chicago Membership Meeting in a Reply to Maynard Krueger's Threats," *Socialist Appeal*, 28 August 1937; Felix Morrow, "Popular Front Surrenders Santander," "Ernest Erber Greets Youth Convention," "News Flash," and Hal Draper, "Left Wing Carries YPSL Convention," *Socialist Appeal*, 4 September 1937; Felix Morrow, "Spanish Anti-Fascist Movement Slandered by Church Hierarchy," & "National Executive Committee Sells Out Socialist Party to La Guardia; Orders Expulsion of All Revolutionists; Toward a Rank and File Convention to Throw Out All the Betrayers and Rebuild the Party on a Revolutionary Basis," & "Supporting La Guardia Betrays Socialism; So Said Clarity but Accepts NEC Betrayal and Leads Expulsions," *Socialist Appeal*, 11 September 1937; "Left Wing Issues Convention Call: NY and Chicago Join Four Slate Committees in National Appeal," & "Spain and the Coming World War: Civil War May be Completely Transformed in Imperialist Conflict," *Socialist Appeal*, 2 October 1937; "Spain in Grip of Spanish GPU," *Socialist Appeal*, 23 October 1937; Felix Morrow, "Arrest of 3 Loyalist Generals Shows Treason in People's Front Regime," *Socialist Appeal*, 30 October 1937. If there seemed unanimity in the entrust camp around Spain,

10 Trotskyism Finds its 'Sea Legs': Cannon and the Maritime Federation of the Pacific

At the end of August 1937, as the Trotskyist entryists were being run out of the Socialist Party, Albert Goldman identified three areas where the Left-wing had concentrated its campaigns: "the Spanish struggle, the slaughter of revolutionary forces in Russia, and the great battles of the C.I.O. in this country." Denunciation of the tragic and murderous defeatism of the Popular Front in Spain and the Dewey Commission/ACDLT exposure of Moscow Trials lies dominated the activity of American Trotskyists in 1937. What was happening on the domestic labor front? How did Trotskyist mass work within organized labor unfold in this same period, when the rise of mass production unionism, in the form of vibrant and often Communist Party-led initiatives within the Committee/Congress of Industrial Organizations [CIO], reconfigured class relations and intensified class struggle in the United States?

California's left-wing Socialist Party milieu, under Cannon's leadership, became an important site for work in the unions, particularly the maritime sector. Shortly after establishing himself in California, Cannon came in contact with a number of militant seamen, some active in the Sailors' Union of the Pacific [SUP], whose leader, Harry Lundeborg, was the first President of the Maritime Federation of the Pacific. The Federation encompassed the SUP, the International Longshoremen's Association [ILA], the Marine Cooks and Stewards [MC&S], and four other small associations of waterfront firemen, engineers, pilots, and telegraphers. If Cannon spent time with various officials of these bodies, he also nurtured relations with a more motley crew, some of whom were later described by Frank Lovell as "the bottle brigade." A few of those with whom Cannon conversed had long involvement in the seafaring unions; some retained syndicalist views and nostalgia for their old days in the Industrial Workers of the World [IWW]; others were attached to the Communist Party. More than one of these sailors remembered Jim from New York days and the defense campaign Cannon spearheaded for John Soderberg, a sailor sentenced to a term in Sing Sing for blowing up a barge.

Cannon's conversations with such militants – who visited him at his home or at the Socialist Party's offices on San Francisco's Van Ness Avenue where

Trotsky would still find it necessary in the future to offer correctives. See his comments on Shachtman and the position developed around support for arms for Spain via a vote for the government's budget versus direct armament of insurgents. Trotsky to Cannon, 21 September 1937 in Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution (1931–1939)*, 290–293. Note as well Trotsky, "The Lessons of Spain: The Warning," *Socialist Appeal*, 15 January 1938.

he sometimes worked – centered either on the necessity of a Bolshevik Party (and the political blind spot at the core of syndicalism) or the pernicious influence of Stalinism among the combative seamen of the west coast. His public speaking often combined these subjects with instructive discussions of the Spanish Civil War and the Moscow Trials. Cannon was committed to politicizing workers, developing an awareness of how the class struggle, embedded in the everyday issues arising at the union halls, extended well beyond the confines of wages, job conditions, and government agencies of regulation. As Lovell recalled, Cannon was less interested in the routine trade union issues confronted by seafaring workers than what was happening in Spain and revelations of Stalinism's counter-revolutionary role in the workers' movement, but he never patronized those who came to him for advice. Instead, he "listened to all the sea stories, the recounting of longshore disputes, problems with arbitration, even the agenda for the next union meetings, which were held weekly then in most of the maritime unions. In the end he usually made helpful suggestions that would be handy the next day."¹²⁰

On events in Spain there was a natural affinity between Trotskyists and trade unionists inclined toward anarcho-syndicalism, and Cannon relied on their influence to promote radicalism more generally. The Sailors' Union of the Pacific and one of the Maritime Federation's District Councils contributed

120 See Frank Lovell in Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 129–135, and for a recollection of Lovell and the maritime fraction in San Francisco, Bernie Goodman, "Frank Lovell in the Maritime Unions," in Paul Le Blanc and Thomas Barrett, eds., *Revolutionary Labor Socialist: The Life, Ideas, and Comrades of Frank Lovell* (Union City, NJ: Smyrna Press, 2000), 36–38. Richard Fraser, "A Letter to American Trotskyists: Too Little, Too Late," *Revolutionary Age*, 3 (No. 4, 1974–75), reproduced Prometheus Research Library, Encyclopedia of Trotskyism Online, 2006, offers a comment on distinct sectors of the SUP that Trotskyists exercised influence within. Among those seamen, some with elected union positions and Trotskyist politics, with whom Cannon worked in 1936–37 would be Frank Lovell, Frank Barbaria, H.J. 'Blackie' Vincent, and Joe Voltero. It is possible, as well, that he connected with an old Wobbly friend, Ralph Chaplin, who was a strong opponent of how the Stalinists were functioning in Spain and in the west coast maritime unions. Chaplin was close to Lundeberg and would work in the Maritime Federation for a time. On all of these figures see, for brief acknowledgment, Stephen Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea: A History of the Sailors' Union of the Pacific, 1885–1985* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1986), 120–121, and for Cannon's and Chaplin's relationship, Ralph Chaplin, *Wobbly: The Rough and Tumble Story of an American Radical* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1948), 347. SUP members, whether they shipped out of east or west coast ports, would long remain aligned with Cannon in the ongoing factionalism within the Trotskyist movement. See, for instance, Mark Walker, *Working for Utopia, 1937–1953* (Concord, CA: Quixotic Press, 2000), esp. 95–119 which covers much of the history outlined below. The Cannon-edited *Labor Action* routinely ran material on the Moscow Trials and the Spanish Civil War, as will be evident in citations below.

mightily to the success of an SP meeting on Spain where Cannon spoke in September 1936. Months later, in April – May 1937, trade union officials in the west coast maritime sector who were supporting the Dewey-led hearings in Coyoacan, and an SUP newspaper, *West Coast Sailor*, denounced the Stalinist provocation culminating in the massacre of anarchists and POUMists in Barcelona.¹²¹ Lundeberg and others thus impressed Cannon early in his California 1936–37 sojourn as “excellent types of militants with whom we could work to good effect all the way around.” His enthusiasm about the prospects was clear in a letter he wrote to Swabeck: “The waterfront situation is very hot, and the door is wide open for us now. I had two meetings with Lundeberg, the leader of the Seamen’s Union of the Pacific, and two other key men in the union, one from Portland and the other from San Pedro Lundeberg and his friends appear to be willing and even anxious to cooperate with us and to facilitate our work It would be folly for us to pass up this opportunity, with all its potentialities. Need not tell you what it would mean to us in the labor movement, and particularly in the SP, if we could establish a firm base on the Frisco waterfront. It would make the party in California, and give us an enormous prestige nationally.”¹²² As merchant seaman Bernie Goodman recalled decades later, “Seamen and longshoremen and shipyard workers up and down the west coast were seething with unrest, and ready for attempts at organizing,” and Cannon’s commitment to class struggle, and those he influenced with his ideas, “paid off in many ways.”¹²³

Cannon and Lundeberg established an early rapport. Having sailed out of Seattle in 1922, Lundeberg was influenced by the IWW, and his approach to unionism was oriented to industrial rather than craft organization. He also endorsed direct strike action and had suspicions, which developed into animosity, concerning the Communist Party and Harry Bridges, its leading supporter among the longshoremen, then affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. All of this certainly drew Cannon to Lundeberg, because in Cannon’s view the main barrier to advancing the class struggle on the west coast was “the waterfront machine of the Stalinists.” The Communist Party had a radical reputation, a strong working-class base, and an established press. All of this, plus the

121 Alexander, *International Trotskyism: 1929–1985*, 818, citing Stephen Schwartz, “Memorandum of Trotskyists in the U.S. West Coast Maritime Industry, 1936–1949,” no date (1983?); Dewey et al., eds., *The Case of Leon Trotsky*, 36–37; Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea*, 121.

122 Cannon to Swabeck, 28 September 1936, Box 3, Folder 9/Reel 4, JPC Papers; Ring interview, 13 February 1974, 2–4. On Stalinism and the issue of regulatory agencies, such as the US Maritime Commission see Lovell, in Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 132; “Maritime Labor and the Government,” *Labor Action*, 30 January 1937.

123 Goodman, “Frank Lovell in the Maritime Unions,” 37.

existence of a layer of reactionaries in the union, who advocated collaboration with capitalist regulatory agencies, presented a formidable obstacle. Cannon knew that the only way to transcend the challenges presented to building class struggle momentum on the west coast was a forceful presence and bold initiatives. He and Lundeberg discussed such possibilities.¹²⁴

Not surprisingly, Lundeberg's openness to Cannon's anti-Stalinism and militant industrial unionism forged a strong bond between the two figures. Lundeberg co-existed with Bridges and the Communist Party during the early-to-mid 1930s, making common cause with them in the 1934 General Strike, but by 1936–37 relations soured. With the Stalinists on the waterfront "following a policy of capitulation," Lundeberg was eager to provide substantial union resources to help Cannon launch a Socialist Party presence in the west coast maritime sector. As noted in the last chapter, a confirmed Abernite, Barney Mayes [Moss/Mass], was editing the Maritime Federation's newspaper, the *Voice of the Federation*, with help from another Abern clique member, Joe Hansen. Its circulation an impressive 17,000, the *Voice* provided Trotskyists in the maritime sector with an important beachhead. It was Mayes, for instance, who brought Lundeberg and Cannon together.

Jack Weber, now aligned with Cannon, wrote to vouch for Mayes at the end of July 1936. He urged forgiveness for Abernite indiscretions and the "adventurist fashion" in which Mayes secured his sinecure on the west coast paper. Imploring Cannon "to devote a little time to him," Weber wanted to dispel any bitterness and antagonism Mayes may have nurtured relating to a lack of cooperation from the Trotskyist leadership of the National Committee. Pressing Cannon to understand that despite the fact that Mayes may have secured his editor's post as a result of "left over attitudes and feelings" of factionalism, Weber pointed out that the Abern follower was now in a "strategic position And he should be made to feel that he can call on you and others for help." "You may or may not be able to help straighten things out, but don't you think it would be worth trying?" Weber pleaded.

Cannon mended fences with Mayes, whom he had known for the better part of a decade, having first run into him as a dissident communist in Detroit in the late 1920s. Knowing that Mayes was "not by nature equipped for the stormy weather of revolutionary politics," Cannon pushed him to be more active in introducing Trotskyists to seamen and helping these committed leftists secure their "shipping cards," allowing them to work in the maritime sector. Frank Lovell later recalled that Cannon advised: "we should all find our sea legs if we

124 Cannon to Swabeck, 28 September 1936, Box 3, Folder 9/Reel 4, JPC Papers.

expected to accomplish anything in the maritime unions.” Cannon suspected that Mayes’ talents as an editor were modest, but Joe Hansen was soon doing most of the work on the *Voice of the Federation*, and Cannon’s first impressions of Hansen were more favorable. Given the nature of the *Voice* as a union publication, however, Mayes and Hansen were curbed in what they could propose. They were necessarily expected by the Federation to concentrate on positive statements of union policy, with Lundeberg demanding they exercise restraint and prudence in all internal labor organization matters.¹²⁵

One major limitation was Lundeberg’s growing anti-communism, and his Wobbly-like refusal to allow “anything political into the paper.” Lundeberg’s attempt to shield the membership from non-workplace related issues was largely animated by his antagonism toward what he regarded as the Communist penchant to turn all union venues to their own political purposes. The Sailor’s Union leader thus proposed that if Cannon could start up a “**weekly socialist paper**” that would take up the struggle against Stalinist compromise, conciliation, and collaboration, the Lundeberg group would “give the paper indirect support, insure it a free access to union halls, etc., and even provide militants among the seamen to distribute it.” Cannon thought the appearance of such a publication would “have a sensational effect on the waterfront.” Talking to three “native socialists” from the SP’s Left-wing about the prospects of such a paper, Cannon was delighted with their enthusiastic response. Both Barney Mayes and Glen Trimble concurred. The former assured Cannon that funds could be raised among the waterfront workers, although this commitment would, in the future, be realized only with difficulty. The latter suggested that such a newspaper would easily receive the support of “the state organization of the SP in the western conference – that is, practically all the states west of the Mississippi,” and would have no difficulty “in maintaining a consistent revolutionary policy,” with free access to all Socialist Party organizations. This optimistic political assessment was no doubt offered in good faith, but it would understate a persistent centrist opposition to the paper’s obvious left-wing orientation. But these difficulties were not the immediate concern as the plan to launch a new paper was bandied about in Cannon’s circle. All consulted agreed that the prospects of the new publication were bright, and that Cannon “would edit the paper, perhaps with Trimble as co-editor.” Estimates were that the endeavor would take an initial fund of \$1000, and future meetings with Cannon as the featured speaker netted \$200 for the venture.

125 The above paragraphs draw on Abern to Glotzer, 15 July 1936, from Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 2, File 3; Weber to Cannon, 29 July 1936, Chrono File, January – October 1936, Folder WP: July 1936, RRL; Lovell, in Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 129–130.

Cannon thus informed Swabeck that he proposed to “camp in Frisco for the next period.” With Bridges and the Stalinists attacking the *Voice* and the SUP, calling for Mayes to be deposed as editor of the Federation’s paper and castigating “Trotskyists, Wobblies, and SUP leadership” as standing for little more than “‘idle talk’ and the ‘spittoon’ philosophizing of sectarians,” Cannon had added impetus to get the new paper up and running. He asked the New York leadership of the entryist “Club” for its reactions, realizing that, “It may appear to you as extremely optimistic, but it is my personal impression that the paper can be realized.” High on the prospects of a breakthrough on the west coast, which Goldman considered “breathtaking,” Cannon headed to the haberdashery to be outfitted in a new suit of clothes, courtesy of the Los Angeles comrades. Insisting that the time was ripe for “us to move into the situation with real force,” Cannon reminded Swabeck of the obvious: “It is not every day that the leaders of a big and important union open the door for us and facilitate our cooperation.”¹²⁶

Lundeberg’s willingness to back Cannon in launching a new left-wing SP publication as a counterweight to the growing political influence of Bridges and the Stalinists was seen as an unusual opportunity too good to pass over. The bloc with the SUP leadership enabled Cannon to conduct mass work in California on a scale which he could hardly have imagined previously.

Intervening in the Sailors’ Union of the Pacific necessarily confronted a complex history. Lundeberg was an unusual trade union official in that he had genuinely radical inclinations. But he also operated within the framework of “normal” practices of the time, common in the mainstream labor movement. This was reflected in the fact that Lundeberg did nothing to challenge and overturn longstanding segregationist practices on the waterfront. The SUP’s combative attitude toward the employers, which included the defense of a white male job trust, reflected deeply engrained attitudes among the west coast’s organized workers; the color bar was not broken for several decades. This practice was initially nurtured by widespread “Asiatic exclusion” policies in the nineteenth century, which were seamlessly extended in the twentieth to African Americans. Lundeberg thus followed in the footsteps of his predecessor, Andrew Furuseth, who founded the nineteenth-century Coast Seamen’s Union, an organization that combined militancy on the job front and “lily white” contractual racism.

¹²⁶ Cannon to Swabeck, 28 September 1936; Goldman to Cannon, 30 September 1936, Box 3, Folder 9/Reel 4, JPC Papers. On Lundeberg/Mayes, see as well Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 205, 211, 227, 247–249; Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea*, esp. 118–121.

A key mechanism for the continuity of this dualism came to be the union hiring hall, a hard fought incursion on the bosses and their right to hire and fire won by the SUP and other maritime labor organizations. The union's entitlement to dispatch crews, without regard to the preferences of the employer, prevented the companies from blacklisting militants. It also gave the unions means to discipline backward members and thereby discourage scabbing. The hiring hall meant the unions had real power. This was unfortunately too often used not only to wage the class struggle, but also to enforce the exclusion of all but white workers. Such a situation was of course not limited to the waterfront. Segregationist practices in maritime work mirrored the virulent racism that characterized American society as a whole: the U.S. military was famously segregated, as were most areas of life, including churches, educational institutions, public transportation, housing, health care, and, of course, employment. In the 1930s California had more Jim Crow laws (17) on the books than any other state outside the South.¹²⁷

There were some attempts to break the color bar in maritime, the most important being in May – June 1921, when 125,000 seamen and dock laborers struck the Pacific, Gulf, and Atlantic coasts in an attempt to realize the dream of “One Big Union.” During this struggle the MC&S broke with the sordid tradition of racial exclusion by organizing 4,000 new members into a New York-based Oriental Seafarers’ Association. Furuseth played an inglorious role in accommodating the bosses and undermining the strike. As a result, a decade and a half later racial exclusionism remained the norm within the craft federations of the maritime sector, including the SUP under Lundeborg. The exception was the MC&S, whose many African American members serviced the west coast’s luxury liners.¹²⁸

127 On Lundeborg and the Sailors’ Union of the Pacific see Joseph P. Goldberg, *The Maritime Story: A Study in Labor-Management Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958); Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea*; and Frederick Lang [Frank Lovell], *Maritime: A Historical Sketch of a Workers’ Program* (New York: Pioneer, 1945). This latter book was a collaboration between Lang/Lovell and a poet/intellectual, Sherry Mangan, a former SPer who exited the Party with the Trotsky entryists in 1937. See Alan M. Wald, *The Revolutionary Imagination: The Poetry and Politics of John Wheelwright and Sherry Mangan* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 191. *Maritime* presents an overly positive view of Andrew Furuseth, focusing on his accomplishments in organizing seamen and opposing state intervention into the affairs of maritime workers (121–125). See also Ira B. Cross, *A History of the Labor Movement in California* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1935).

128 David Montgomery, “Immigrants, Unions, and Social Reconstruction in the United States, 1916–1923,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1934), 106–107. Notable for its struggles against racial discrimination and tolerance of gays, the MC&S was closely linked to Bridges and the Communist Party; its members had little to do with the SUP or its early Trotskyist supporters. See Fraser, “Letter to American Trotskyists.”

Indeed, African American unionists remembered that “blacks would sit on benches for up to two weeks in the union hall waiting for job assignments, while whites went from one job to another.” Dockwork was rigidly racialized on the west coast, and the black sociologist, Horace Cayton Jr., claimed that when work was scarce, African Americans were rarely admitted to white gangs, and “colored longshoremen” were “frozen out” altogether. Bruce Nelson has noted that for Lundeberg, “the language of voluntarism merged easily with the rhetoric of white supremacy.” As Lundeberg consolidated control of the SUP, then, he was heir to what survived of seamen’s militancy, but exhibited little inclination to oppose the longstanding racial homogeneity of the union. Lundeberg was said to have physically assaulted Revels Cayton, a MC&S official, secretary of the Federation, and Communist Party organizer, hurling a racist epithet at the black unionist.¹²⁹

This white supremacy was perhaps latent in 1936–37, when Cannon came in contact with Lundeberg and the SUP, there being so few blacks working the west coast waterfront. One contemporary authority, not considering the luxury liners and the MC&S, estimated that there were less than 25 African American union members along the entire Pacific coast. On the eve of the 1934 San Francisco General Strike a mere 50 black men, the majority undoubtedly non-union, worked the city’s waterfront trades. In Los Angeles, home to San Pedro’s Longshore Local 13, the 2,500 union members included Mexican Americans and probably a smattering of other workers of color, but apparently *not a single black worked the waterfront*. Indeed, as Nelson has argued, it was not until the migrations associated with World War II that race began to have a dramatic impact on California’s maritime unionism. It was then, through a combination of an expanding merchant marine, government intervention to curb discriminatory hiring practices, and the influx of southern blacks to the west coast, that Lundeberg’s role in continuing the racist, exclusionary practices of the federated Pacific coast trades became transparent. The hiring hall, racialized seniority, and layoff mechanisms sustaining white supremacy, as well as the SUP’s “all white” membership, became issues of public controversy and civil rights agitation. In 1936–37, however, this was all roughly a decade in the future. There is no indication, during Cannon’s involvement with the SUP, that he was aware of the racialized tinderbox of class struggle militancy into which

129 Horace Cayton, Jr., *Long Old Road: An Autobiography* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1970), 118; and the excellent discussions in Bruce Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 89–141; Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 189–222. On Revels Cayton and Lundeberg see Fraser, “Letter to American Trotskyists”; Sarah Falconer, “Revels Cayton: African-American Communist and Labor Activist,” Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project, depts.washington.edu/civrl/revels_cayton.htm, accessed 8 June 2021.

he stepped with such conviction and political fervor. This is not to excuse what undoubtedly was a certain blindness to longstanding racist practice, but rather to contextualize a disturbing political myopia.¹³⁰

- 130 A reasonably sophisticated report to Cannon, in late February 1936, outlined the political issues associated with organizing maritime workers on the west and east coasts. It gave no hint of the significance of issues of race, concentrating instead on industrial organizing and Stalinism. See George Treanor to Cannon, 28 February 1936, Chrono File, January – October 1936, Folder WP: 15–29 February 1936, PRL. Lang's/Lovell's account of the struggles of seafaring workers focuses on the state and the particular challenges posed by World War II with respect to government intervention and Stalinist capitulation. These overshadow all other concerns, including that of race, which is conspicuous in its absence in the Socialist Workers Party [SWP]-sponsored publication. Note, as a reflection of this B.J. Widick's endorsement of the progressive nature of the SUP in 1938, citing the Lundeberg-led union's opposition to state-orchestrated "fink hiring halls," in Widick, "Labor Unity – A New Stage," *New International*, 4 (November 1938), 331–334. By 1945, a Trotskyist critique of Lundeberg had emerged, but it concentrated in *Maritime* on the "anti-political" nature of Lundeberg's leadership of the Maritime Federation, which expired in 1941. In Lang's/Lovell's words, Lundeberg substituted direct action militancy for a class struggle approach guided by a political program. This Wobbly-like orientation, neatly encapsulated refusal of government intervention/regulation, exposing Stalinist maneuvering, manipulation, and capitulation, but it avoided the large issue of ultimate social transformation and the realization of an anti-capitalist politics. Lang/Lovell considered this "a political strike without a program" (Lang, *Maritime*, 151). Instead, the SWP put forward a maritime program of restoration of union independence; workers' control; and independent political action (161). But race, and how maritime labor's use of the hiring hall to keep seamen's and waterfront jobs "lily white," and Lundeberg's role in preserving this racist state of affairs, was apparently absent from the SWP's discussion of maritime in the 1940s. See also Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 189–222, with a subsequent chapter exploring the AFL-CIO contests of the 1940s, in which Lundeberg's racism surfaced more obviously (247–249). The questions of race, the Maritime Federation, and the SUP, as well as Lundeberg's reactionary stands of the 1940s and 1950s, are also alluded to in Herbert Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System: Race, Work, and the Law* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 218; Sean Burns, *Archie Green: The Making of a Working Class Hero* (Urbana and Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 48; Walter Galenson, *The CIO Challenge to the AFL: A History of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 430–431. A very useful account, and one that accents the significance of World War II migrations of blacks to the west coast is Nelson, *Divided We Stand*, 89–141. For an informative discussion of the hiring hall and racial exclusion that emphasizes the significance of the chronology accented in my interpretation see Nancy Quam-Wickham, "Who Controls the Hiring Hall? The Struggle for Job Control in the ILWU During World War II," in Steve Rossworm, ed., *The CIO's Left-Led Unions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 47–67. Also helpful for context is Paul T. Miller, *The Postwar Struggle for Civil Rights: African Americans in San Francisco, 1945–1975* (New York: Routledge, 2010). It would be a mistake to argue that the Bridges-led International Longshoremen's Association [ILA] and International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union [ILWU] had resolved all issues of race in the period addressed in this chapter. These bodies were undoubtedly less exclusionist in their racial practices than was Lundeberg's SUP. Nonetheless, in some ILWU locals on the west coast the hiring hall

Cannon's focus was on using his Socialist Party perch and SUP connection to establish *Labor Action*, an agitational revolutionary newspaper that appeared 16 times, beginning on 28 November 1936 with a final issue on 1 May 1937. *Labor Action* promoted revolutionary politics among west coast trade unionists and left wingers in the Socialist Party. This audacious venture received mixed reviews and less than unambiguous support from Cannon's comrades in the New York Trotskyist "Club." But it coincided, importantly, with a 99-day strike by the Lundeberg-led Maritime Federation. That strike, which pitted maritime workers against the shipping bosses, was also the occasion for a vicious confrontation between Bridges and the Communist Party, on the one hand, and Lundeberg and his Trotskyist allies on the other.

The 1934 San Francisco General Strike had secured the joint employer-union hiring hall for longshoremen, giving workers some control over their jobs, and consolidating the authority of strike leader, Harry Bridges, whose close relations with the Communist Party were well known. But among sailors, the hiring hall was anything but an accepted institution. Lundeberg's SUP gained a reputation for "anarcho-syndicalist" militancy in the aftermath of the 1934 conflict. Its use of "quickie strikes" and its admission of former members of the Communist-led Maritime Workers Industrial Union angered powerful interests within the American Federation Labor and the International Seamen's Union [ISU], to which the SUP was affiliated. In January 1936, at the annual convention of the ISU, the SUP's charter was revoked. Lundeberg immediately put the now independent SUP on an "emergency program" and issued substitute union

remained a bastion of racist job exclusion well into the 1960s and 1970s, as was evident in Portland, Oregon's Local 40. Aggrieved black workers launched a lawsuit – known as the Gibson case – against the union local after its late desegregation, demanding damages for the overtly discriminatory practices they had endured. Years later, in the 1980s, the suit was settled, the union forced to pay damages to those it had subjected to the racism of the Portland local's hiring hall. Class-conscious black workers, such as Frederic Addison of San Francisco's largely African American Local 10, at first balked at making any contribution through their Local to offset the costs of the suit borne by the ILWU, arguing that they had no interest in paying for the longstanding racist practices of Local 40. But upon reflection, Addison grasped the essential class politics of the lawsuit, which, while waged by oppressed and wronged black longshoremen in Portland, nonetheless weakened the union's capacity to fight the bosses and encouraged the intervention of courts in regulating and disciplining the unions. Addison concluded that it was right to continue to build solidarity by supporting Local 40, even though its history of racial exclusion was repugnant. He issued a statement that "members of Local 10 pursue a course that will strengthen the bonds between Local 40 and Local 10 and all other ILWU locals. Help them, so that they can help us – to fight the bosses and the courts" (*Militant Longshoreman*, 10 April 1982). I would like to thank Michael Goldfield for pushing me to address Lundeberg's policies, race, and the SUP.

books to sailors, who signed a pledge to support the expelled union's leading officers. To counter the direct action militancy routinely exhibited on board SUP-worked ships, the employers, aided by the state's Merchant Marine Act of 1936, introduced a "Continuous Discharge Book." This required seamen to carry a permanent identification booklet, in which a record of each sailor's voyages and behavior on the job would be available for future employers to scrutinize. Obviously intended as a way to blacklist militants and trouble-makers, this "fink book" was an object of derision among the sailors. As the Popular Front Communist Party endorsed what it called the "progressive fink book" that had the backing of the liberal Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration, a battle between Lundeberg and Bridges was brewing.

On 1 October 1936, west coast employers announced that hiring in the maritime trades would henceforth be done "off the docks," bypassing the hiring hall. Lundeberg's SUP rejected these new rules, and countered by demanding union employment preference for ship's officers; crew members to be hired through the hall; overtime pay in cash, rather than time off; and a workday of 8 or 6 hours, depending on the department. The strike that commenced on 30 October 1936 widened the rift between Bridges and Lundeberg. The long-shoremen's leader, who was reluctant to cede his prominent place among maritime workers to anyone else, nonetheless adhered to the Communist Party's policy of accepting the Roosevelt-endorsed fink book. Well aware that the militant sailors wanted no part of the discharge document, the Stalinists provided an exquisite example of covering a capitulation with a militant-sounding slogan: "Take the Fink Book – and Burn it on the Capitol Steps May Day."

Bridges manufactured a crisis of confidence during the strike in December, attacking Mayes as a Trotskyist enemy of the workers, castigating him for publishing in the *Voice of the Federation* a truthful statement that the SUP was close to reaching a possible agreement around terms of settlement with the employers. Furthermore, Bridges presented this negotiation process as a "one man" affair of Lundeberg's SUP that threatened to undercut the remaining maritime unions. Other labor organizations were in fact involved and informed, and all of the maritime bodies had the tradition of negotiating with employers separately. They had historically agreed that none would sign individually until an agreement was reached by all, it being understood that if one union could extract concessions first, it would benefit the remaining labor bodies. The Stalinist assault on Mayes, according to the historian of the Sailors Union of the Pacific, Stephen Schwartz, was "worthy of the Moscow Trials themselves." Benjamin Stolberg, writing in the pages of the *Saturday Evening Post*, later referred to the public excoriation of Mayes as "the first 'Moscow Trial' in America." The Communist Party published a pamphlet by Roy Hudson, *Trotskyites Plot to Dis-*

rupt U.S. Maritime Unions (1937?), which claimed that Mayes, with Cannon as his clandestine controller, was chiefly interested in “*the splitting of the progressive forces by trying to mobilize and incite others against the Communists.*” Such “*Trotskyite rats*” were simply agents of “Hearst, the ship owners ... Hitler and all the forces of reaction.” Mayes and Lundeberg’s SUP denounced these attacks as the work of a “disruptive faction” and recalled the longstanding campaign of vile character assassination that had been waged against the Sailors’ leader. The Stalinists fought back. Taking advantage of Lundeberg’s absence from San Francisco as he traveled the coast to address seamen’s locals, a group led by the Communist Party effected a temporary *putsch*. It seized the sailors’ union offices briefly, issued another bulletin repudiating the SUP’s negotiating stand and public statements, and eventually secured the ouster of Mayes and Hansen from their positions at the *Voice*.¹³¹

Cannon, of course, jumped into this fight. The first issue of *Labor Action*, which appeared four weeks after the eruption of the strike, was dominated by coverage of the seamen’s struggle. Cannon pointed to the California walkout as an example of “the superiority of common action through federation over the old craft isolation,” and insisted that the strike furthered the cause of industrial unionism. He bent his pen against the significant back-stabbing by the Communist Party in the first six weeks of the job action. Cannon exposed the strike-breaking substance of Stalinist sheets like *The Beacon*, which urged workers to voluntarily move “perishable cargo” lest they alienate families inconvenienced by the shortage of foodstuffs and prompt federal marshals to deputize the coast guard or the marines to act as scabs in unloading ships. He also pilloried the

131 Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea*, 118–120; Lang, *Maritime*, 87–95; Lovell in Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 130–131; Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 213–218; Roy Hudson, *Trotskyites Plot to Disrupt US Maritime Unions* (New York: Communist Party, no date, 1937?); Benjamin Stolberg, “Communist Wreckers in American Labor,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 2 September 1939. For an unpublished account of the ways Bridges and the Communist Party did their utmost to sabotage the 1936–37 Maritime strike, fabricating allegations of Mayes’ misconduct, see Tracy Adams, “Maritime Strike – West Coast, 1936,” Chrono File, January – October 1936, Folder WP: 1936, from Albert Glotzer Papers, Box 10, File 4, PRL. On the issue of government regulation and the fink book as issues fomenting maritime militancy see “Maritime Labor and the Government: The Scheme to Put Over the Fink Book by Amending the Copeland Bill,” *Labor Action*, 23 January 1937; “Maritime Labor and the Government: The Drive for An Arbitration Board to Curb Strikes and Wreck Unions,” *Labor Action*, 30 January 1937; “Fink Book Blocked by Fight of Unions,” *Labor Action*, 20 February 1937; James C. Rayne, “Maritime Labor and the Government,” *Labor Action*, 17 April 1937. For discussion of the announcement of the SUP settlement and how Stalinist allegations were unfounded see “New Negotiations Point to an Early Strike Settlement on Union’s Basic Terms,” *Labor Action*, 19 December 1936; “Owners Offer Agreement to Sailors’ Union; All Basic Union Demands Conceded in Settlement Proposed; Sailors Will Not Sign Until All Unions Get Agreements,” *Labor Action*, 26 December 1936.

four-day office *coup d'état* pulled off by Stalinists inside the SUP as Communist Party muscle flexing. Pointing out that the terms Lundeberg negotiated, which would be submitted to the SUP membership for approval, contained “the best and clearest provisions for union recognition and control of hiring ever put on paper,” Cannon shredded Stalinist claims that this amounted to a “separate settlement” growing out of “one-man negotiations.” He denounced the Communist Party “frame-up machine” and the occupation of the union headquarters, a stunt that the capitalist press quickly used to whip up hostility to the SUP and its leader. One major capitalist newspaper, the San Francisco *Chronicle*, ran a story headlined “LUNDEBERG FOLLOWERS JOIN SHIP OWNERS IN ATTACK ON BRIDGES.”

Within the “captured” union, repudiations of the past “strike crazy” militants flowed like wine in a Bacchanalia of class-collaboration apology. As one old-time radical seaman told Cannon, “The Sailors’ Union was lower than a whale’s belly.” But as Cannon pointed out in a *Labor Action* article, this orgy of retreat and retribution was little more than “Four Days that Shook the Waterfront.” When Lundeberg returned to San Francisco from his speaking trip to SUP locals, the seamen, initially dazed by the Communist Party’s factional “capture” of their union, quickly rebounded. The restoration of the legitimately elected leadership commenced with a mass meeting in which Lundeberg rallied the ranks, silenced his critics, and fired the Stalinist “publicity committee” that had repudiated the union’s policies and achievements. A “mighty roar” greeted the final vote, in which Lundeberg was overwhelmingly endorsed, a mere 66 out of 1,000 in attendance dissenting. As Cannon concluded, “The union was ‘uncaptured,’ the real militants were back at the helm. ... It was a wild ride while it lasted. And it is a warning to the sailors that it is still possible in these days to get shanghaied, and that it is better to be on guard in the future.”¹³²

Cannon drew the connection between the political struggles in the labor movement and perspectives for the Socialist Party entry:

132 Among Cannon’s major articles on the strike and the actions of the Stalinists see Cannon, “The Maritime Strike,” *Labor Action*, 28 November 1936; Cannon, “The Color of Arsenic – and Just as Poisonous,” *Labor Action*, 12 December 1936; Cannon, “Four Days that Shook the Waterfront,” *Labor Action*, 2 January 1937, “The Champion from Far Away; Frame-ups and Build-ups; The Great Leaders and the Great Whoosis,” *Labor Action*, 16 January 1937, some of which are reprinted in James P. Cannon, *Notebook of an Agitator* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 97–124. Cannon’s antagonism to Stalinism was perhaps voiced most baldly in an unpublished “Notebook of an Agitator” manuscript, which extended his critique of the Communist Party beyond the context of the SUP. See Cannon, “Six Reasons Why Maritime Workers Should Join the Communist Party – If I’m Wrong, Sue Me,” Typescript, “Speeches and Writings, 1927–1942,” Reel 35, JPC Papers.

The turn toward trade-union work means the turn toward new life for the Socialist Party in the West. It means reconstructing the organization on a proletarian foundation. And that is what is needed first of all, if we are to be a real force in the class struggle and not a mere club of well-meaning people which never offends anybody, and which nobody ever thinks of taking seriously.

It takes a fighting organization to make a revolution, and the place to build it is inside, not outside, the broad labor movement. That means, primarily, the trade unions. We still have a long way to go to complete the necessary transformation of the party. What has been done so far – and it is all to the good – is, after all, merely dabbling. We will not really get down to business until we devote nine-tenths of our time and attention to trade union work.

The trade unions are the elementary and basic organizations of the workers and the main medium through which the socialist idea can penetrate the masses and thus become a real force. The masses do not come to the party; the party must go to the masses. The militant activist who carries the banner into the mass organization and takes his place on the firing line in their struggle is the true representative of resurgent socialism.

...

At this point we always come to the old moth-eaten and utterly ridiculous contrast of theory and practice. There is neither sense nor profit in such a debate, for the theory of Marxism, as Engels explained many times, is a guide to action. ... Effective revolutionists unite theory with practice in all their activity.

...

The trail-blazing work of the socialist activists in California unions has opened a path for the party as a whole. There can be no doubt that the near future holds great successes for the party if it follows that path.

“In the trade-union struggle,” Cannon concluded, “the party tests and corrects itself in action. It hardens and grows up to the level of its historic task as the workers’ vanguard in the coming revolution.”¹³³

¹³³ Cannon, “Deeper into the Unions,” *Labor Action*, 5 December 1936, also in Cannon, *Notebook of an Agitator*, 106–107. For an assessment of Cannon’s importance in the maritime struggle see Sam Meyers to Swabeck, 23 November 1936, “General Organizational and Secretarial Correspondence, 1923–1956,” Boxes 15–16/Reels 20–21, JPC Papers.

The maritime strike of 1936–37 was a yardstick against which revolutionary socialists could be measured, as well as an example of the dynamic possibilities for workers' struggle in America. As Cannon repeatedly stressed in *Labor Action*, successful class struggle required a willingness to take on the bosses, their government, and the labor lieutenants of capital, as well as the Stalinists. When, after a protracted, 99-day battle, the Maritime Federation unions emerged in the first week of February 1937 with a settlement that made some concrete gains, Cannon declared the strike an important victory. It was not so much the improvements in wages, hours, and overtime pay that he considered significant, although such concessions, wrung from the bosses at considerable cost, would help stimulate other workers to fight for material improvements. More significant, however, was the workers' willingness to defend their trade unions. As soon as the AFL's ISU attempted to wreck the SUP by revoking its charter, the ship owners launched a frontal assault on the union. Militant seamen, forced into the conflict, then confronted a toxic cocktail of misconceptions, many of them shaken and stirred by the Communist Party. Cannon listed five: 1) delaying strike action to avoid embarrassing President Roosevelt; 2) urging the movement of "perishable cargo" from strike-bound ships; 3) fetishizing the convenience of the "public"; 4) tolerating state intervention; 5) and, most dangerous of all, advocating the acceptance of the fink disclosure book, with hollow promises to fight it once the strike was settled. By rejecting such capitulationist policies, the Maritime Federation succeeded in binding the workers together in a stronger and more united body, which Cannon characterized "a transitional form of labor organization." Future class struggles, he suggested, would need to more directly address the goal of industrial unionism.¹³⁴

The west coast Maritime Federation strike was pivotal to both *Labor Action* and Cannon's California trade union work in the Socialist Party. When the strike

134 Cannon, "After the Maritime Strike," *Labor Action*, 20 February 1937, in Cannon, *Notebook of an Agitator*, 122–124. See also, "Big Gains for Unions After Bitter Struggle: Maritime Labor Emerges from 99-Day Struggle with Strengthened Position and High Morale," *Labor Action*, 6 February 1937. Both Trimble and Cannon stepped up their criticisms of the Stalinists in the aftermath of the Maritime strike, with Trimble writing on "Socialist Policy in the Trade Unions," and castigating the policies of the "communist playboys," an article that drew a critical rejoinder from Lillian Symes, a subsequent leader of the ostensibly left-wing California Clarityites. Cannon, for his part, editorialized against Trotsky-baiting in the Socialist Party, pointing out that in the ongoing preparations for war those who would take a strong stand against armament would face "the patriotic mob." "The Communist Party," Cannon concluded, was "already offering its services as the leader and organizer of this mob." See Trimble, "Socialist Policy in the Unions," & Cannon, "Editorial," *Labor Advocate*, 6 February 1937.

ended in February 1937, how this work was to continue was suddenly much less clear. There was a real question about the ability of a handful of revolutionaries to sustain a regional weekly publication.¹³⁵ As the paper's continuity was jeopardized, Cannon reflected on *Labor Action's* meaning, writing to Trotsky in early March 1937:

The launching of *Labor Action* was a rather bold and quickly-decided undertaking. But I thought it wise to seize the opportunity offered by the California organization to publish a weekly organ under official auspices, without delay. I am deeply convinced that we must have a weekly press at all costs – if not in New York then somewhere else – and for my part I never intended the suspension of the *Militant* as a more than temporary concession to the centrists to gain admittance to the Socialist Party.

...

My stay in California was also prompted by the opportunity to establish a base of influence for our tendency in the maritime unions. To me the entry into the Socialist Party was the application of only one aspect of a general formula governing a consistent orientation from a propaganda circle to mass work. Work in the SP should not exclude the direct penetration of the mass movement of non-political workers when such an opportunity presents itself.

Our paper had a great success during the maritime strike. It was distributed in thousands of copies and became the 'bible' of the waterfront militants, especially in the fight with the Stalinists who are strong in this field. Fifteen sailors joined the Socialist Party – and all of them proudly declare they are 'Trotskyites'. Such results speak for themselves. Bigger things are yet to come, for we have very close co-operative relations with leading circles of the union militants whose 'syndicalism' is partly tradi-

135 Dunne to Cannon, 10 February 1937; [?] to Dunne, 11 February 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: 9–28 February 1937, PRL; Cannon to Comrades, 3 February 1937; 7 February 1937, Box 4, Folders 2–3/Reel 4, JPC Papers. For Cannon's desperate plea for funds for *Labor Action* see "The Party at Work," *Labor Action*, 28 November 1936; "Sidebar Notes," *Labor Action*, 1 May 1937. Cannon offered thanks "To the Rank and File" for supporting *Labor Action*, 1 May 1937: "To those sterling comrades who were born in the poverty of the working class and who understand the task of achieving socialism in terms of unremitting daily effort, to those comrades who are glad to get up at 5 AM for the toil of bringing the message of revolutionary socialism to fellow workers, to those with courage enough to fight every day in the week, who come to branch meetings with seven full days experience in the bitter grind of the class struggle – to you belongs the front page banner of working class respect and appreciation."

tional and partly a reaction against Stalinism. This work takes time and patience, but the results are solid and lasting.¹³⁶

This optimism was perhaps overstated, and by May 1937, there were signs that the Trotskyist presence in the Maritime Federation was weak and ineffectual, with one militant writing Cannon to complain of “the farce of holding fraction meetings” that led to so little. Glen Trimble was doing his best to hold things together, imploring Cannon to return from the east coast and offer a ten-week lecture forum, addressing the key topics confronting the politics of maritime militants. Correspondence with the Progressive Union Committee, based in San Pedro, California, indicated that the Trotskyists themselves understood that they were no match for the larger and more embedded Bridges-led Stalinist forces.¹³⁷ Cannon’s prestige among the SUP ranks and other west coast waterfront workers nonetheless remained high, and on 25 August 1937, Lundeberg met with Cannon in New York to try to enlist his co-operation in the ongoing struggles with the Communist Party for influence over maritime workers.

Lundeberg had just been handed control of the seafaring sector by American Federation of Labor boss, William Green, who was locked in a contest with the CIO (many of whose key organizers were CP militants) for control of the labor movement. The SUP leader proposed that Cannon send fifty men into maritime, concentrating on the Atlantic and Gulf ports and mounting “a militant opposition movement” to “the CP fakers.” This mobilization could then link up with the established SUP on the west coast. Cannon’s eyes must have widened

136 Cannon to Trotsky, 3 March 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: March 1937, from Trotsky Papers, Harvard University, PRL. Trotskyist work among the California maritime unions would continue throughout the late 1930s and into the 1940s, with Frank Barbaria working as a Lundeberg-appointed organizer in the fish cannery field. Tom Kerry also worked closely with Lundeberg, editing the newspaper of the AFL-affiliated Seafarers International Union (SIU), *Seafarers Log*. The SIU was a new body, initiated in the late 1930s, with the SUP at its core. Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea*, 120–121; Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985*, 818; Mary-Alice Waters, “Tom Kerry: Proletarian Fighter,” *The Militant*, 28 January 1983. See also Glen Trimble, “West Coast Seamen to Continue Struggle for Militancy, Autonomy,” *Socialist Appeal*, 30 October 1937; “Koci, West Coast Militant Menaced by Deportation,” *Socialist Appeal*, 27 November 1937; “W. Coast Unions Score Victory Over Stalinists: Sailors, Firemen Deal Heavy Blows to Bridges-CP Fakers,” *Socialist Appeal*, 22 January 1938; “Seamen Stop Stalinists in Union Fight,” *Socialist Appeal*, 5 February 1938.

137 Flo to Jim, 7 May 1937, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Glen to Jim, 10 May 1937, Reel 4, JPC Papers; [?] to Johannessen, 6 June 1937, “General Organizing and Secretarial Correspondence, 1923–1956,” Boxes 15–16, Reels 20–21, JPC Papers.

with a sense of the possibilities, and he wrote to Vincent Ray Dunne, “we can influence and practically lead the whole movement if we react promptly and intelligently to the opportunity.” Cannon was prepared to have his comrades accept responsibility for editing the *West Coast Sailor* and spearhead the drive for an industrial union to amalgamate sailors, firemen, cooks and stewards, and others. Within weeks Cannon put together a “draft program for the maritime unions” that was soon accepted by San Francisco area workers in the SUP and other maritime trades. His conception that “the next step” must be to form “an industrial union of West Coast seamen” met with “complete agreement.” Yet the strategy of moving toward “One Big Union” came aground on the reefs of AFL-CIO conflict, when jurisdictional rivalries between a reactionary International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the Bridges-led longshoremen resulted in bitter conflicts, broken picket lines, and ugly thuggery. Complications further arose from Lundeberg’s reluctance to embrace a maritime union in which Bridges and the Communists (who looked upon the sailors as a center of resistance to their hegemony on the waterfront) obviously exercised considerable influence, with Stalinist efforts to break the back of the SUP unrelenting. The conflict resulted in the Stalinist-dominated west coast longshore locals breaking from the AFL’s International Longshore Association in 1937 and joining the CIO as the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union [ILWU]. These bitter rivalries plagued maritime unionism throughout the late 1930s and beyond.¹³⁸

Cannon’s push for industrial unionism and his commitment to develop Trotskyist cadres in the labor movement had some small successes in this period. But, with the exception of Minneapolis, the Trotskyists were generally forced to the background in this arena, overmatched by the vigorous, aggressively hos-

138 Cannon to Dunne, 26 August 1937, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Alan E. Silvius to Cannon, 8 September 1937; Norman Mini to Cannon, 20 September 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Folder WP: September 1937, from JPC Papers, Reel 4, PRL. It is possible that Cannon was led astray by Lundenberg, being enticed into an unseemly jurisdictional fight to tip the balance toward the AFL by urging militants in the maritime trades to try to accept the practices of some discredited labor bosses like the west coast Teamster leader, Dave Beck. See, for the ubiquitous conflicts between the AFL and CIO unions in the maritime sector “Sailors Union to Vote on Joining CIO,” *Labor Action*, 1 May 1937; “San Pedro Longshoremen Fight to Keep Hiring Hall,” *Socialist Appeal*, 26 February 1938; “Seek to Oust Sailors from Maritime Body,” *Socialist Appeal*, 7 May 1938; “Bridges Thugs Attack Pickets on West Coast,” *Socialist Appeal*, 14 May 1938; “Seamen Fight ‘Fink Halls’; Pickets Open Drive on NY Gov’t Hiring Hall,” *Socialist Appeal*, 30 July 1938; “Harry Bridges Orders Union-Smashing Drive Against Coast Sailors,” *Socialist Appeal*, 30 April 1938; “Stalinist Union Wreckers Hit Hard by NMU Elections; 20,000 LA Workers Quit Bridges CIO Council,” *Socialist Appeal*, 13 August 1938. On Lundeberg-Green tensions see Fraser, “Letter to American Trotskyists.”

tile, and vastly larger Communists Party presence in the unions. Stalinist CPers were thus a force to reckon with in the labor upheaval of the 1930s, but one that too often proved a great organizer of defeats and worse.

11 Frame-Up in Minneapolis: Who Killed Patrick J. Corcoran?

About 10 PM on 17 November 1937, a snowy Wednesday evening, a man drove to his house at 28 Penn Avenue South in the Bryn Mawr district of Minneapolis. It was a west end suburb nestled by parkland, where many workers from nearby railway yards resided. After parking his car, the man was on the way to his front door when one or more assailants attacked him. The assault was severe. A beating left the man's skull crushed before he was shot in the head. The inert body was discovered an hour-and-a-half later by a neighbor.¹³⁹

The dead man was Patrick [Pat] J. Corcoran, and he was returning home from a meeting of trade unionists associated with the Teamsters Joint Council, for which Corcoran served as the Secretary-Treasurer. Who killed him? Why? And what would be the meaning of his death in Minneapolis, where the labor movement had been put on the map by the Trotskyist leadership of the Teamsters' General Drivers' Union, their 1934 struggles for trade union recognition aided directly by Cannon and others in the leadership of the then-designated Communist League of America.

Corcoran was not a Trotskyist. But he was, in November 1937, regarded as extremely significant within Minneapolis Trotskyist circles. A leading official, quite probably Vincent Ray Dunne, wrote to Bert Cochran in Cleveland that, "Corcoran was ... by reason of his office and the attitude he had taken in the discharging of his duties of this office in conjunction with our general line, by far the most important figure, for us, in the entire mass movement, outside of party ranks."¹⁴⁰ It had not always been thus.

When he was an official of the Milk Drivers' Union in Minneapolis, Corcoran was, at first, no friend to the revolutionaries leading the General Drivers' Union [Local 574]. Cannon described Corcoran as "an old school trade unionist," which was not likely entirely complimentary, and he placed an accent on the teamster official's farmer-laborite politics, his Catholicism, and his traditional-

139 See, among many possible sources, "Corcoran's Activities Before He Met Assassins are Traced; Death Spot Held 'Perfect Murder Set Up,'" *Minneapolis Star*, 18 November 1937.

140 [Vincent Ray Dunne?] to Cochran, 25 November 1937, Unnamed File, Largely Relating to 1937, Box 1, Bert Cochran Papers, Tamiment Library, Bobst Library, New York University, New York, New York [hereafter Cochran Papers].

ism/conservatism. Indeed, in 1935, as the International Brotherhood of Teamsters boss, Daniel Tobin, led a crusade against the dissidents in Local 574, revoking their charter and setting draconian conditions for their readmission to the International, Corcoran had been one of Tobin's trusted lieutenants in the war against the rebel union. He was also an influential figure on the Teamsters Joint Council, and friends with Cliff Hall, fired for incompetence by Local 574. Corcoran and Hall tried to float a new Drivers Union, a Tobin-sanctioned Local 500 that appealed to the bosses with its public face of legitimate craft union status and a respectable, "sane" approach to bargaining collective agreements. But this embittered jurisdictional battle, echoing in the Central Labor Union, went nowhere when the Trotskyist-led Local 574 prevailed in strikes against small trucking firms and extended the gains of 1934 into wider circles of the transportation sector. After months of effort, Corcoran and Hall managed to sign up only 50 drivers in what amounted to a phantom Local 500. It was little more than one percent of the size of Local 574. The *Northwest Organizer*, voice of the militant drivers, scoffed at the idea that the solidarity of the Minneapolis teamsters had been compromised: "If this represents a split ... Webster didn't understand his own dictionary."¹⁴¹

Over the course of 1935 and into 1936, the Trotskyist leadership of Local 574 faced the concerted opposition of Tobin, Corcoran, and Hall of the IBT, as well as AFL head, William Green, and his thuggish emissary, Meyer Lewis, who dedicated himself to cleansing the local labor movement of its irksome "Reds." The Stalinist Communist Party was eager to drive a wedge between the Trotskyists and the trade union functionaries in the Central Labor Union, breaking the rank-and-file drivers "away from 574," which could then be "colonized" and returned to Tobin. On top of that, the old Citizens' Alliance (renamed the Industrial Association) and recalcitrant employers were as hostile as ever to militant industrial unionism. Yet 574 continued to make progress in "Making Minneapolis a Union Town." It supported unemployed workers on relief, enrolling them in the Federal Workers Section of Local 574 [FWS], a body open to all of those in the city who found themselves out of work.

The FWS gained a reputation as militant defenders of the jobless, organizing a number of protests around cuts in relief payments. It joined with the Workers' Alliance of America [WAA], an amalgam of Socialist Party, Communist Party, and American Workers Party organizations of the out-of-work, to champion the

141 Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Power* (New York: Monad, 1973), 56–76; Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters*, 229; Carlos Hudson, "Minneapolis: One Year Later," *The Nation*, 141 (30 October 1935), 512–514; "A False Rumor," *Northwest Organizer*, 8 May 1935; James P. Cannon, "Who Killed Patrick Corcoran – Why?" *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937.

well-being of the Depression's dispossessed. In 1937 this mobilization forced the Minneapolis Board of Public Welfare to rescind regulations denying single men and single women under the ages of 45 and 35 relief and supplemental aid. Female-headed households, curtailed in their right to relief entitlements, benefitted especially from the joint efforts of the FWS and the WAA. The culmination of this work among the unemployed and in support of relief recipients occurred in 1939, lying just beyond the chronological end point of this study. In July of that year a Works Progress Administration [WPA] strike turned violent, with police, relief strikers, trade union supporters, and those refusing to honor the picket lines protesting cutbacks in public assistance engaging in dramatic conflict. With police tear-gassing the streets and firing into crowds of working-class men, women, and children, one unemployed union painter, Emil Bergstrom, was killed and many more were seriously injured, including two youngsters. Over 160 militants were later indicted, a "veritable cross-section of the city's population," with about one-third of those brought before the courts being women. In the three trials that resulted, Trotskyists Max Geltman and Edward Palmquist, described as the "very fountainhead of the Minneapolis WPA strike conspiracy" were among the dozens convicted. Marvel Scholl Dobbs extolled the virtues of the women who battled during the 1939 strike and faced police brutality, prosecution, and jail time. She wrote in the *Northwest Organizer*: "If 'conspiracy' is helping your fellow man to a better life; if 'conspiracy' is putting bread into the mouths of hungry children and old people; if 'conspiracy' is giving your all with never a thought for yourself, then they stand convicted. They are real women. They make me proud to be a woman!"¹⁴² Local 574 was thus on the front lines of a series of strikes, often waged by workers who had been locked out of union protections.

At the Strutwear Hosiery plant, for instance, 200 male knitters, paid double the wage of the roughly 900 mostly female production-line workers, carried out

142 On the WPA strike of 1939 see Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Politics* (New York: Monad, 1975), 197–234, which provides ample quotes from the *Northwest Organizer*, cited in the above paragraph, including a reproduction of Marvel Scholl [Dobbs], "One Woman to Another," *Northwest Organizer*, 26 October 1939. See also the accounts in Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915–1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 132–164, which contains excellent background on the relief agitations of the FWS and WAA; Donna Haverty-Stacke, *Trotskyists on Trial: Free Speech and Political Persecution Since the Age of FDR* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 20–24; Hermann Erickson, "WPA Strike and Trials of 1939," *Minnesota History*, 42 (Summer 1971), 202–214; Anna Louise Strong, *My Native Land* (New York: Viking, 1940), 185–196; George Dim Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1970, 487–512.

an eight-month 1935–36 strike that ignored the concerns of the women operatives. The protracted battle soon escalated into a struggle over union recognition for all of the workers, however, and the successful end of the conflict owed much to the support of Local 574 and the FWS, which provided shock troops in battles with cops and blockaded the factory with trucks to prevent the removal of equipment and goods. Another strike at the Flour City Ornamental Iron Works, saw Local 574 and the FWS establish a gauntlet of vehicles along the streets where scabs were driven away from the plant on a nightly basis. Strikers and supporters gave them a “tattooing” the strikebreakers “weren’t likely to forget soon.” At a mass picket of 5,000 in September 1935, the cops attacked strikers and their pro-union allies, killing two men, Eugene Caspar and Melvin Bjorklund. A grand jury promptly absolved the Mayor, the police, and the company of any wrong doing. The Trotskyist-led Non Partisan Labor Defense immediately held a theatrical counter-trial at Local 574’s hall, with the General Drivers’ Union President, Bill Brown, presiding. A jury of twelve workers who had not been witness to the carnage was impaneled, Local 574’s lawyer, Gilbert Carlson, was assigned to a staged Mayor Latimer as his defense counsel, and two dozen witnesses were called, testifying “of shooting by the cops, of hapless victims dragged from passing cars, and of people hit in their homes by stray bullets.” The mock trial ended in the conviction of Latimer and the Police Department, found guilty of murdering Caspar and Bjorklund. The iron workers of Flour City, organized in Local 1313 of the International Association of Machinists (in which a strong Stalinist element had done its best to rebuff any support offered from 574) won a settlement the next week.

As unorganized workers in Minneapolis exploded in walkouts, appealing to Local 574 to draft demands, set up picket lines, and establish negotiating committees, a left-wing was gradually consolidated within the Central Labor Union. In a last-ditch effort to regain control and muscle Local 574 out of its position of prominence, Tobin tried strong-arm tactics. Ray Dunne and George Frosig of Local 574 were viciously beaten and many truck drivers assaulted or physically intimidated. But this gained Local 500 few if any committed recruits. Corcoran and others were reduced to raiding small trucking outfits, hoping to bolster the ranks of the officially sanctioned but sagging Local 500. It was a losing cause and, eventually, by late June 1936, Tobin having decided to throw in the towel, Corcoran broached a truce, telephoning Ray Dunne to suggest that peace talks commence between Local 574 and the Teamsters Joint Council.¹⁴³

143 These events in the above paragraphs are fully recounted in Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 65–122, with further comment on the Strutwear strike in Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle*, 116–122.

Cannon was centrally involved in decision-making about whether Local 574 should accept Tobin's conditions for reinstating the charter of Local 574. With Tobin retreating from his previous insistence that the Trotskyist-led Local had to come up with retroactively-owed per capita dues, a deal was struck. If Tobin was backing down, Corcoran knew that the IBT boss had to save face by securing some concessions, which included liquidating both Local 574 and Local 500 and renaming the merged local 544. All members of 574 were to be reinstated, in good standing, with no financial penalties. Offices of the new local were to be shared, Farrell Dobbs continuing as staff director, while the FWS would remain an adjunct of the local. The *Northwest Organizer* became the official organ of the Joint Teamsters Council under Miles Dunne's editorship, and the final agreement was subject to the approval of Tobin and the IBT, which Corcoran assured his new partners was a mere formality.

Cannon and other leading figures in the New York Trotskyist "Club" were not immediately convinced that the proposal should be accepted. They doubtless worried that Tobin would use the liquidation of 574 and the resulting merger to secure control over the General Drivers' Union, and then move to turf out its leadership. But Cannon, after meeting with the Trotskyists at the helm of the Minneapolis Teamsters and their ally, Bill Brown, reported that such tested combatants in the class struggle were confident they could "retain decisive control in the proposed new local." Unable to sustain an argument that an independent union was advisable, Cannon went along with the tactical decision to reinstate Local 574 under the new conditions proposed by Tobin and Corcoran. "I don't fully agree with your decisions," he told his Minneapolis comrades, "but I will take full responsibility with you, even if it goes bad." Before finally reuniting with the IBT, Bill Brown and Ray Dunne made a last attempt to see if Local 574 might be integrated into the new mass production Congress of Industrial Organizations. They were advised to seek reinstatement into the IBT as the CIO had no immediate plans to launch any organizing drives in the trucking sector. When the proposal to liquidate Local 574 into a new Local 544 was put to a 10 July 1937 meeting of union stewards many expressed serious concern. Some were reluctant to give up the Local's cherished number, 574, thinking they would be perceived as crawling back to Tobin "in shame"; others were convinced that the thugs they had been battling would "tear us to pieces and knock off our officers." One said bluntly: "Under no circumstances will allow Pat Corcoran to act as a dictator." After a full membership meeting and extensive discussion, Local 574 voted decisively (6 to 1) to dissolve and accept the new agreement that it would, henceforth, be Local 544 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.¹⁴⁴

144 Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 123–132. Burnham wrote to Cannon at the end of July 1937: "I hope,

Corcoran, of course, was a pivotal player in the reconstituted truckers' union. He joined Bill Brown, Carl Skoglund, and Farrell Dobbs on a seven-person Executive that contained three other Tobin supporters. It was at this point that Dobbs and Skoglund initiated their plan to extend union-organization of all trucking-associated workers beyond Minneapolis, building the IBT throughout the Northwest. Even though they were in the minority on the local's Executive Board, the Trotskyist-radical alliance that forged the successful organization of Minneapolis teamsters in 1934, and extended class struggle gains throughout the strike wave and relief protests of 1935, felt certain they could continue the momentum building over the course of 1934–35. Now integrated into the AFL, the militant core of Local 544 was satisfied it could displace Tobin's thugs and push its IBT counterparts in the direction of an aggressive and widening campaign of interstate unionization. Dobbs, the Dunnes, Skoglund, Brown, and others were convinced that if Tobin's appointees persisted in the defeatist and abstentionist policies of outdated craft unionism, they would inevitably be repudiated by the rank-and-file. They argued that they could neutralize at least some of Tobin's anti-communist loyalists and perhaps win some over. The Minneapolis Trotskyists gambled much on this presumption, and Cannon went along with their belief in themselves.

Before long Corcoran and others on the defunct Local 500 Executive came to see that their Trotskyist counterparts in the new local were dedicated to advancing the labor movement. A healthy competition developed between the former Tobin allies and the Trotskyists to see which side might better demonstrate a commitment to the class struggle. Corcoran's reputation soared when, during a one-day strike at a Minneapolis dairy, he backed a gun-toting cop away from a picket line, the muzzle of the weapon inches from the labor leader's chest. "If you think you can fire on a peaceful picket and get away with it, try shooting me," Corcoran said defiantly, adding with scorn, "you boss-loving sonofabitch."¹⁴⁵ Other strikes and organizing drives among warehouse workers and taxi/laundry/sanitation drivers brought Corcoran still closer to the militant leadership of the old 574.¹⁴⁶

Something of a test occurred two months after the merger of the two teamster locals. A brother duo of Tobin's arm-twisters with gangster pasts, Eddie and

by the way, that you are going to send in some details on the Minneapolis agreement. It sounds not so good to me, from what I know so far; but no doubt, as you say, there was no alternative.' Burnham to Cannon, 27 July 1936, Reel 4, JPC Papers.

145 Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 135.

146 For a full discussion of the local struggles of this period see Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," esp. 356–437.

Al Fiorotto, had little if any union experience, but they were members of the old Local 500 and Dobbs had to find staff work for them to do in the union. He arranged for them to handle grievances at small companies, but it was soon discovered that they were taking bribes from employers. The Executive Board, four of whom had worked with the Fiorotto brothers in the Tobin wars, agreed with Dobbs that in as much as the pair seemed to have little liking for trade union endeavors they should be prevailed upon to find work elsewhere, which they did. Another Tobin staffer, Joe Bellini, presented a more difficult problem. Bellini assaulted a rank-and-file member of the Local, and Dobbs, Skoglund, and Brown were adamant that he be fired. Corcoran and his Tobin confrères on the Executive Board had some residual loyalty to Bellini from the fight against Local 574. At the meeting where terminating Bellini's services was discussed, Corcoran was in the Chair. He presided over a deadlock that threatened to break apart the fragile consensus building among the two camps. In the end, Corcoran voted with Brown, Dobbs, and Skoglund: Bellini was dismissed. This led to an exodus of what remained of the unsavory and criminal Tobin operatives who came into the bona fide teamsters local with the merger of 574 and 500.¹⁴⁷

Corcoran thus made something of an about-face. As Cannon wrote, he united in common cause with the Dunne brothers and other leaders of the new Local 544; he believed in and worked with all of those who would advance the cause of trade unionism. Corcoran was now part of an "admirable personal collaboration" that saw the expansion of labor organization in Minneapolis, St. Paul, Duluth, and beyond. All of this won "the confidence and esteem of the rank-and-file," and Corcoran was elected Secretary-Treasurer of the Teamsters Joint Council. He was also denounced by Stalinists as a dreaded "Trotskyite," a guilt-by-association slur to which he offered neither denial nor apology.¹⁴⁸

The Trotskyist-teamster alliance was poised for significant breakthroughs. Corcoran and Dobbs nursed into being the North Central District Drivers' Council [NCDDC]. Established in January 1937, it quickly gained ground, although Corcoran would not live to see its most dramatic achievements which,

147 Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 356–357; Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 142; and for Carl Skoglund's discussions of gangster elements from the old Local 500 see Carl Skoglund interview with Fred Halstead, 14 May 1955, Typescript, 34, Box 2, David Riehle Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota. There is a slight confusion of the facts surrounding the transgressions of the Fiorotto brothers and Bellini, with some newspaper accounts suggesting that it was the Fiorottos who assaulted a union member, not Bellini. I follow the account in Dobbs, *Teamster Power*. See "Local 544 Victory Over Wholesale Grocers Hailed by Minneapolis Labor," *Socialist Appeal*, 1 January 1938.

148 James P. Cannon, "Who Killed Patrick Corcoran – Why?" *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937.

by late 1938, included IBT contracts with interstate trucking firms covering 250,000 drivers and affiliated workers in eleven states. Through adroit alliances with established IBT officialdoms, ensconced in parochial local Joint Councils in cities like Chicago, Omaha, Sioux City, Des Moines, Kansas City, Tulsa, and elsewhere, Dobbs secured improved conditions for truckers involved in the growing over-the-road transportation industry. This “modernization” campaign largely took place without the necessity of militant strikes, although in the case of Omaha a recalcitrant contingent of employers, reminiscent in its opposition to trade unionism of the antediluvian Minneapolis Citizens’ Alliance, dug in its heels, resulting in a pitched class battle. The shift away from outmoded understandings of teamster work as localized hauling, and the recognition of the increasing importance of over-the-road, long distance, interstate trucking entirely transformed the face of Teamster unionism in the United States. Figures such as Jimmy Hoffa later conceded they learned the ropes of teamster organizing from Dobbs, and the unionization drive spearheaded out of Minneapolis and said to have been first conceived by Skoglund, led to a five-fold national expansion of the IBT ranks from 1933–39, the membership rolls of the International soaring to almost 400,000. All of this brought IBT patriarch, Dan Tobin, long hostile to the Minneapolis Trotskyist leadership of the General Drivers’ Union, into a temporary alliance with Dobbs, whose prestige within the International union grew as he was associated with the interstate successes of teamster unionism and occupied a General Organizer’s post.¹⁴⁹

149 Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 169–187; Ralph C. James and Estelle Dinerstein James, *Hoffa and the Teamsters: A Study of Union Power* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1965), 96–114; Irving Bernstein, *The Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933–1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), 250–252; Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters*, 232–233; Walter Galenson, *The CIO Challenge to the AFL: A History of the American Labor Movement, 1935–1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 481–482; “Drivers Sign Pact Covering 11 States, 250,000 Workers,” *Socialist Appeal*, 3 September 1938; “Pact Covering 250,000 Drivers Nets Big Gains,” *Socialist Appeal*, 10 September 1938. The post-1938 gains of these years were not without their underside, as pointed out by Trotsky, who criticized certain errors of opportunism that crept into the interstate organizing drive and warned of how alliances with pro-Roosevelt trade union labor bureaucracies would shatter amid the political pressures of war. See Leon Trotsky, *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1939–1940]*, ed. Naomi Allen and George Breitman (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 273; Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters*, 235–239; Chris Knox, “Trotskyist Work in the Trade Unions, Part 3: The Primacy of Politics,” in *The Transitional Program: The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (London: International Bolshevik Tendency, 1998), 106–114. The original success of the Trotskyist Minneapolis teamster leadership occurred through militant class struggle, with the Dunne brothers, Skoglund, and Dobbs fighting not only the bosses, local political figures, and the police, but also the Tobin bureaucracy of the IBT. The later interstate success largely leapfrogged over this kind of militancy, taking place through a subtle

Pat Corcoran's murder in Minneapolis in mid-November 1937 was intricately tied to the contested history of local and national class relations, in which Trotskyists clashed with an ossified trade union bureaucracy and appeared to have come out on top. In this epic battle, the struggle always, in one way or another, pitted an archaic and spent craft unionism against the advancing tide of industrial organization. Minneapolis in the mid-to-late 1930s was an anomaly in the overall United States scene, a rare place where the Communist Party took a backseat to the Trotskyists who were led by Vincent Ray Dunne, Miles Dunne, Grant Dunne, Carl Skoglund, and Farrell Dobbs. The affiliation of the dynamic Trotskyist-led teamsters to the AFL, while the city's weaker and less effective unions were more likely to line up with the CIO (in which the CP operated) was another unusual feature of the Minneapolis labor movement. Corcoran's death, a mystery that would never be solved, was seized on by the Stalinists as an opportunity to cast aspersions on the leading figures in the city's combative trade unions.

Corcoran's murder was shocking, but not entirely surprising. Less than a week before his brutal killing, a reporter for the *Minneapolis Star* cryptically slipped into his column a prediction that, "A prominent labor leader ... will be

organizational shift, in which the accent was increasingly placed on relations between Minneapolis Trotskyist leaders and other IBT officialdoms in established Locals of the International union. Through utilizing the strength of the Minneapolis Local to pressure interstate trucking firms to concede conditions prevailing in the militant center of teamster organizing and effective mass production unionism, Dobbs and his comrades in the General Drivers Union were able to bring Teamster Joint Council locals in other cities on board with organizing over-the-road trucking on an interstate basis. This expanded the ranks of the Teamsters and enhanced union authority, but the alliance between the Minneapolis Trotskyist leadership and conservative, conventional IBT officials in other cities could not survive a later political crisis of differentiation that developed during World War II, when the influence of the Trotskyists threatened to develop an anti-war stand within the working class. This brought Tobin out of his willingness to tolerate Trotskyist-led successes, culminating in the IBT leader's all-out attack on the Minneapolis revolutionaries and their influence in the labor movement. In conjunction with the state repression unleashed in 1940–41, with the Minneapolis Trotskyists subjected to Smith Act prosecution, this ultimately wrote *finis* to the impressive role of the revolutionary leadership of Local 574. For later repressive developments see Haverty-Stacke, *Trotskyists on Trial* and Bryan D. Palmer, "Gagging the Revolutionary Party': The First Smith Act Trial and the Rule of Law," in Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker, eds., *The Class Politics of Law: Essays Inspired by Harry Glasbeek* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2019), 171–188. For an argument that the Trotskyist leadership of the Minneapolis teamsters was already significantly weakened by state repression *before* the Smith Act trials see Barry Eidlin, "'Upon this foundering rock': Minneapolis Teamsters and the transformation of business unionism, 1934–1941," *Labor History*, 50 (August 2009), 249–267. This point was made implicitly, as well, by Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 487–543.

'taken for a ride' within two weeks." A local alderman, Albert G. Bastis, informed police some time before Corcoran's death that the former Tobin strongman, as well as Bill Brown, and all three Dunne brothers – Vincent, Miles, and Grant – were "slated for killing." Corcoran himself had supposedly gone to the State Governor, Elmer Benson (the two men were fellow Farmer-Laborites), expressing fears for his life. In the aftermath of the murder, testimony of a variety of trade union figures and family members of militants before a coroner's inquest brought to light the commonplace nature of threats and violence against those active in the leadership of an aggressive workers' movement. Miles Dunne, who succeeded Corcoran in being elected to union posts in Local 544 and the Teamsters Joint Council, was ambushed by a trio of thugs in early December 1937. In spite of the "intelligence" prior to Corcoran's killing and subsequent investigations no charges were ever laid. "Due in no small part to the non-cooperative attitude of the police," Dobbs concluded, clues as to the assassin's identity never surfaced, even though rewards of \$500 and \$10,000 were offered by Governor Benson and the Teamsters Joint Council. Corcoran's funeral took place on the Saturday after his death. It was attended by 10,000 workers, with 100 local and regional labor officials serving as honorary pallbearers, and delegates of the North Central District Drivers Council acting as ushers. The morning of the burial was proclaimed a holiday by the trade union movement.¹⁵⁰

Trade union militants, especially those in Local 544, were, from the outset, inclined to view the employers as the perpetrators of the crime. A statement by the Teamsters Joint Council stressed that Corcoran's "unswerving loyalty to the

¹⁵⁰ Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 438, citing *Minneapolis Star*, 9 November 1937; Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 157–168, quote on police at 162, and further on Dobbs' view that officials in law enforcement and politics were uninterested in solving the murder, Kristoffer Smemo, "The Politics of Labor Militancy in Minneapolis, 1934–1938," MA thesis, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 2011, 107; Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 146; James M. Shields, *Mr. Progressive: A Biography of Elmer Austin Benson* (Minneapolis, MN: T.S. Denison & Company, 1971), 164–165; "P.J. Corcoran Slain; Rites Saturday – TJC Calls Holiday for Morning, 9–12," *Northwest Organizer*, 19 November 1937; "Police Knew Minneapolis Death Plots; Six Other Labor Leaders Are Marked for Fate of Patrick Corcoran," *Madera Tribune*, 19 November 1937; "Labor Leader Slain in Minneapolis," *Socialist Appeal*, 27 November 1937; "Thousands Pay Tribute to P.J. Corcoran," *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937; "12 Warehouses Closed; Teamsters Strike for Pay Rise," *New York Times*, 10 December 1937. In the summer of 1938 there were allegations that the Associated Industries group, an employer organization that succeeded the Citizens' Alliance, established a fund of \$35,000 to import gunmen to assassinate three leaders of the Trotskyist-led Local 544. See "Alleged Plot to Kill Labor Leaders is Exposed in Minneapolis," *Socialist Appeal*, 9 July 1938.

interests of the workers incurred the enmity of a large section of Minneapolis employers and their agents. ... If [they] think that by murdering individuals they will be able to wreak their will upon the working class, they have murdered in vain." Cannon himself, in a leaflet reproduced in the *Socialist Appeal*, "Who Killed Patrick Corcoran and Why?" pointed to Minneapolis as the vanguard of working-class self-activity in the United States. "Minneapolis," he proudly noted, "once the open-shop colony of the Citizens' Alliance, is today the best organized city in the entire country." In its ceaseless agitation for better wages and conditions and broader organization, the revolutionary leadership of the Minneapolis teamsters had, in Cannon's view, "cost the once arrogant bosses tens of millions of dollars since 1934, and driven the once all-powerful Citizens' Alliance underground." Cannon could not definitively answer the question of who killed Pat Corcoran and why, but he knew whose hands were *not* clean: "Well, at any rate, you can say the bosses didn't shed any tears about the killing. ... another union man's blood wouldn't make their record any blacker." At a mass meeting sponsored by the Minnesota Socialist Party and chaired by Vincent Ray Dunne, Cannon insisted that Corcoran's death must be "laid at the door of the enemies of labor," with the Associated Industries playing the role of a "pack of jackals," hostile to progressive unionists. More than sixty years later, Corcoran's grandson, still looking for answers about the murder, thought it most likely that the killer was "a mobster hired by management interests," a conclusion also drawn in 1964 by Art Preis in his history of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, *Labor's Giant Step*.¹⁵¹

Minneapolis Trotskyist teamsters, Carl Skoglund, Farrell Dobbs, and Vincent Ray Dunne, suspected that Corcoran's murder was the work of gangsters originally brought into Local 500 by Tobin. This notion was given credence when the IBT boss failed to respond to a communication by Dobbs, addressing the assassination and Local 544's attempts to bring the assailants to justice. But without firm evidence, Trotskyist leaders of the Minneapolis teamsters did not point fingers at the Fiorottos or Bellini who, in any case, though formerly aligned with Corcoran, had no ongoing relation to his work in the reconstituted Local 544. The most prudent course was to stick to the proposition that

151 "P.J. Corcoran Slain ...," *Northwest Organizer*, 19 November 1937; "Labor Leader Slain In Minneapolis," *Socialist Appeal*, 27 November 1937; James P. Cannon, "Who Killed Pat Corcoran – Why?" *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937; "Corcoran Slain by Labor's Foes Says Cannon," *Socialist Appeal*, 11 December 1937; Doug Dooker, "Who Killed Patrick Corcoran? (Family seeks answers to 1937 murder of union leader)," *Minneapolis-St. Paul Magazine*, 1 August 1998; Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step: Twenty Years of the CIO* (New York: Pioneer, 1964), 136.

the murder of Corcoran had to be attributed to enemies of organized labor.¹⁵² Cannon suggested to Vincent Ray Dunne in a private communication that in some of the union's initial statements on the case it had been a mistake "to make the categoric accusation that the employers had something to do with the assassination." Privately, Cannon would not rule out the possibility that the Stalinists could themselves have carried out the killing, but he thought it best to use a broader formulation, "that labor-hating elements and enemies of the union were behind the man who fired the shot." He also argued that the Communist Party needed to be attacked mercilessly for its "off-hand exoneration of the bosses in [the] ... assertion that Corcoran was killed by gangsters in the union."¹⁵³

Cannon and others were attuned to the possibility that the Communist Party would use the killing of Corcoran to mount an offensive "frame-up" campaign, exploiting the tragic murder to undermine Local 544, targeting the Dunne brothers, Dobbs, and Skoglund. Cannon wrote to Vincent Ray Dunne less than a week after the murder that it was clear from the *Daily Worker's* New York city edition that the Communist Party was gearing up for a "big campaign to smear and discredit the union, and in particular our comrades." He thought it best to assume that "the plans for [an] illegal frame-up have already been concocted." Local 544, in Cannon's view, now faced a "deadly peril which must be combatted in the most vigorous manner." He advised setting up a substantial union fund to bankroll the expenses of an investigation, publicity, and agitation. Special editions of the *Northwest Organizer*, as well as leaflets and pamphlets, could transmit information to other unions. AFL officials in Minneapolis should be pressured to reject the Stalinist allegations and repudiate any Communist Party attempt to "turn the search for Corcoran's assassination into a demand for police investigation of the trade union." Pushing Dunne to "hit back at them hard," Cannon stressed that the Stalinists were not only "wreckers and adventurers," but also "frame-up artists par excellence." Cleveland's Bert Cochran was told by a Minneapolis comrade that, "The Stalinists, who may not have been connected with, or even instrumental in [Corcoran's] death directly, have nevertheless seized upon the occasion of his assassination to renew a thousand-fold and in a hundred new forms, their slanderous charges of racket-

152 Skoglund interview with Halstead, 14 May 1955, Typescript, 34, Box 2, David Riehle Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota; Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 441; "P.J. Corcoran Slain ...," *Northwest Organizer*, 19 November 1937.

153 Cannon to Dunne, 23 November 1937, from Trotsky Papers, Harvard University; and Cannon to Dunne, 23 November 1937, both in Chrono File, November – December 1937, Folder WP: November 1937, PRL.

eering, gangsterism, double-dealing class collaboration against the Trotskyites, and in general against the driver's movement here."

In Minneapolis, Stalinist vilification of Trotskyism was facilitated, in part, by the acrimonious division separating Communist Party trade union activists in the new sectors of CIO unions from their Trotskyist critics, based in AFL-affiliated transportation unions. The International Brotherhood of Teamsters was the centerpiece of this strength, but it extended as well into other craft unions covering railway, electrical, machinist and other sectors. Camouflaged by the seemingly more progressive CIO, Minneapolis Communists castigated the AFL as backward and gangster-ridden, laying the blame for this apparent state of affairs on their Trotskyist rivals. *Socialist Appeal* commented that it was aware of "the plans of the Communist Party, which is abusing the name of the CIO organization in Minneapolis now under its factional domination, **to frame-up the leaders of Local 544.**" Cannon rushed to Minneapolis with Felix Morrow to help the *Northwest Organizer* "take all the necessary and indicated measures to expose and counter the activities of the Stalinist frame-up perpetrators."¹⁵⁴

The day before Corcoran's funeral, the St. Paul *Daily News* unleashed an attack on the powerful truck drivers' union that it had locked horns with over the previous summer, lamenting that such labor organizations "can paralyze any business." It targeted "labor gangsterism" and "labor czars," their power garnered from "tribute," which sustained a reign of "labor terrorism." Another Twin Cities newspaper, the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, later referred to the "hoodlumism and gangsterism and Trotskyism in the AFL ranks." This anti-labor/Red Scare campaign was picked up by newspapers in Chicago, Duluth, Fargo, Sioux Falls, Omaha, and Kansas City – the territory in which the North Central Dis-

¹⁵⁴ The above two paragraphs draw on "Labor Leader Slain in Minneapolis: Stalinists Seek Frame-Up of Leaders of Local 544," *Socialist Appeal*, 27 November 1937; Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 159; [Vincent Ray Dunne?] to Cochran, 25 November 1937; Shachtman to Cochran, 1 December 1937, Unnamed File, Box 1, Cochran Papers; Cannon to Dunne, 23 November 1937; and Cannon to Dunne, 23 November 1937, Chrono File, November – December 1937, Folder WP: November 1937, from Trotsky Papers, Harvard University, PRL. It was a reflection of Cannon's concern that he wrote two different lengthy letters to Dunne on the same day upon reading the *Daily Worker* account of Corcoran's murder. A good indication of the support radiating outwards from the IBT-affiliated General Drivers' Union into other AFL affiliates was a March 1938 Minneapolis trade union protest of a Moscow frame-up Show Trial. The communication was signed by trade union officials from three councils/publications, five transportation unions, and nine other unions (some unions represented by more than one individual). See "Trial Protest Sent by Mpls. Trade Unions: Midwest Organizations Wire Troyanovsky On Moscow Frame-up," *Socialist Appeal*, 12 March 1937.

trict Drivers Council led by Corcoran and Dobbs had been gaining strength organizing truck drivers and others working in the transportation industry. By innuendo and association, the capitalist press projected Corcoran's murder as a by-product of "labor racketeering": union brothers fell out over the division of spoils while masquerading as defenders of working-class interests. The *Chicago Tribune*, in an editorial entitled "The Trouble with Minnesota," suggested that the "unprincipled racketeers" responsible for Corcoran's death had been given a free hand because the ruling Farmer-Labor Party, by allowing 1934's strike victories, turned the whole state into a "field of radicalism." Crime was "the easiest and most conclusive method of gaining success," asserted the Chicago paper, widely known as one of the most reactionary sheets in America. The pious conclusion was obvious: "all other forms of lawlessness and vice, including kidnapping, take encouragement from such conditions, and Minnesota is a distressed state."¹⁵⁵

The Communist Party was quick off this class struggle (from above) mark. It concocted a "Volunteer Committee for Driving Gangsterism from Minneapolis," issuing a leaflet calling for a "mass public hearing" to address the mobster-influence in the trade unions responsible for "the murder of Patrick Corcoran." Cannon and his comrades were incensed that the labor movement was being branded as "Pat Corcoran's murderers." They warned that, "If the Stalinist line prevails, any labor leader killed will not only be killed with impunity by labor's enemies, but dishonored in death!" With the Communist Party operating under cover of the CIO, Cannon pointed to the difference between the situation in Minneapolis and that of the rest of the United States:

The labor movement of Minneapolis does not follow the national pattern. The bona fide labor movement here consists of a powerful group of AFL unions, revitalized by the organizing campaigns of recent years and generally progressive in their policies. The CIO movement here – so-called – outside the textile and clothing unions, consists for the most part of Stalinist paper organizations and split-offs from progressive AFL unions – split-offs criminally engineered by these buzzards of the labor movement. The CIO as a national movement speaks in the name of millions of organized workers, but in Minneapolis it is only the Charlie McCarthy of the

¹⁵⁵ See, for instance Carlos Hudson, "A Frame-Up That Failed," *New International*, 4 (March 1938), 73–75, quoting the St. Paul *Daily News* and the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, as well as drawing on coverage of the Corcoran murder in the *Socialist Appeal*, especially "Labor Aroused by Midwest Murder: Rejects GPU Plans to Smear Union Labor," *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937.

Communist Party, the stooge for its crooked maneuvers and the scapegoat for its crimes.¹⁵⁶

Cannon may have overstated things, but it was true that in Minneapolis the AFL unions were not only dominant, but also far more progressive and much more inclined to industrial unionism than elsewhere. This, of course, was a product of Local 574/544's development, which involved an overt and remarkably successful struggle for industrial unionism within the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, one of the most ossified, ostensibly craft, unions of the AFL.¹⁵⁷

Well before Corcoran was murdered, the leadership of Local 544 refused the notion that the difference between the forces of the AFL and the CIO in Minneapolis could be characterized as old style craft unionism versus inclusive industrial organization. The fundamental issue, declared the *Northwest Organizer*, was: "Is the Minneapolis labor movement to be split up and clubbed into the dirt, all for the purpose of feeding the appetite of the self-serving Stalinist clique?" The Central Labor Union and Local 544 characterized Communist Party-led attempts by local CIO affiliates to raid established unions and set up rival organizations, as "declaring war on the rest of the union movement." The most powerful of these new bodies in Minneapolis, in which the CP had substantial clout, was the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers [UE]. It seems that Cannon underestimated or unduly dismissed the significance of this body, and failed to anticipate the effective organizing drive it carried out among the machine assembly and electrical workers in Minneapolis's industrial suburbs. This initiative, which linked up with the CIO's Steel Workers Organizing Committee unionization campaign in the state's Mesabi Iron

156 James P. Cannon, "Who Killed Pat Corcoran – Why?" *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937. Charlie McCarthy was a popular and well-known radio "personality," a ventriloquist's doll created by comedian and actor Edgar Bergen. Cannon's reference to the Minneapolis CIO thus suggests it was a puppet, whose strings were pulled and whose voice was determined by the CP.

157 Cannon's jaundiced comments on the CP/CIO in Minneapolis did of course acknowledge the progressive and pioneering role of the CIO in the United States as a whole. On this history see, for instance, the essays in Rosswurm, ed., *The CIO's Left-Led Unions*; Rosemary Feurer, *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900–1950* (Urbana and Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Roger Keernan, "The Communist Influence on American Labor," in Michael E. Brown, Randy Martin, Frank Rosengarten, and George Snedeker, eds, *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of United States Communism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993), 163–197; Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict That Shaped American Unions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Preis, *Labor's Giant Step*, among many other studies.

Range, as well as the formation of an Industrial Union Council, gained support from upper levels of the state administration, where Farmer-Laborite Elmer Benson was an unabashed CIO supporter. He was perhaps prone to wink and nod at Communist Party suggestion that Corcoran's death was a consequence of gangsterism inside Local 544.¹⁵⁸

Nevertheless, Minneapolis, Cannon asserted, was not Moscow, and the frame-up was destined to fail. Although the Stalinists had tried and tested witch-hunt practices, refined in the Moscow Trials, and were able to draw on considerable financial resources as well as "a retinue of conscienceless scoundrels ready for any infamy," they could not, in Cannon's view, hide behind their self-constructed CIO façade for long:

The elementary class interest of the national labor movement – CIO as well as AFL – is against them. The truth, the evidence, the circumstances, the motivation for the murder of Pat Corcoran are all against them. But, above all, against them stands the record of the Stalinists, on an international scale, a bloody and terrible record of frame-up, of murder, of character-assassination, of corruption – which has revolted the conscience of the world and warned enlightened workers everywhere to be on guard.

The labor movement of Minneapolis is on guard. The frame-up gang has to operate in the full light of publicity here. The attempt to stage a Minneapolis version of the Moscow Trials has already become, instead, a trial of the Stalinist frame-up gang, and will result in their exposure and their conviction before the public opinion of the working class.

The first nail in this coffin was provided by the Communist Party itself. Unlike Cannon, it crossed class lines in appealing for support in its campaign against

¹⁵⁸ For a more positive view of CP/CIO trade union development in Minneapolis in these years see Smemo, "The Politics of Labor Militancy in Minneapolis," 101–108; John Earl Haynes, "Communists and Anti-Communists in the Northern Minnesota CIO, 1936–1949," *Upper Midwest History*, 1 (Fall 1981), 55–73; Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 125–126, which also details the critique of CIO/CP raiding, 144–145 and AFL-CIO friction as it related to Corcoran's murder, 145–146. On Benson and Corcoran see as well "Benson at Funeral of Slain Union Chief: Mayor Leach also in Thousands Paying Honor to Corcoran in Minneapolis," *New York Times*, 21 November 1937. Trotskyist and AFL critique of the raiding of International Association of Machinists locals and the formation of the Communist-led United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers includes: "CLU Endorses AFL Machinists," *Northwest Organizer*, 30 September 1937; "CLU Supports AFL Machinists," *Northwest Organizer*, 1 October 1937; "Who is Aided by Union Split," *Northwest Organizer*, 1 October 1937.

gangsterism. It appealed to “church, social, and civic organizations” and, more tellingly, to “leading persons of the community” and “public spirited persons.” These were constituencies that could, as critics pointed out, “always be relied upon when an opportunity presents itself to stooge for the bosses and stab labor in the back.”¹⁵⁹

The Stalinists also overplayed their hand by proclaiming in both the *Daily Worker* and in a local sheet entitled the *CIO Industrial Unionist* unsubstantiated allegations that labor gangsterism and Corcoran’s murder could be traced to the Trotskyists at the helm of Local 544 and their allies in other AFL unions. “[Corcoran’s] assassination was the logical outcome of the gangsterism and racketeering,” claimed these Communist Party organs, adding that these deformations were “fostered in the Minneapolis labor movement by the Dunne-Brown-Dobbs leadership of 544 and their allies among the worst right wing section of the A.F. of L. fakerdom.” The Communist Party falsely claimed that the Fiorotto brothers and Bellini were “organizers” in Local 544 and part of a “Trotskyist machine.” No mention was made that the trio had in fact been dismissed from the Drivers’ Union; at the time of Corcoran’s murder, neither Bellini nor the Fiorotto brothers had any formal connection to Minneapolis labor organizations. Yet the mobsters were still referred to by some Stalinists as “Corcoran’s boys.” The *Daily Worker* further claimed that the Trotskyist Dunne Brothers Trust was colluding with corporate capital, part of an unholy municipal electoral alliance that involved the Northern States Power Company and other public utilities. When the CP’s Voluntary Committee demanded that the Dunne brothers be driven out of the local labor movement, claiming the endorsement of 21 American Federation of Labor officials, half of them publicly repudiated any involvement in the developing witch-hunt, and complained that their names had been attached to Committee propaganda without their knowledge.

Harry Bridges and his publicity agent, James O’Neil, in a CIO radio broadcast from San Francisco, claimed to have a signed confession of a Minneapolis man, supposedly bankrolled by local teamster officials and Tobin agent Meyer Lewis. The document stipulated that this individual had been commissioned to travel to the west coast and assassinate the leader of the longshoremen. News soon leaked that labor figures in Minneapolis warned Bridges that the individual making these claims was mentally unstable, a view later confirmed by

159 “Labor Aroused by Midwest Murder; Rejects GPU Plans to Smear Union Leaders,” & Cannon, “Who Killed Pat Corcoran – Why?” *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937; Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 159–160.

the man's wife. Affidavits secured in Minneapolis established that there was nothing to the claim that a hired hit-man had been sent to the west coast to "rub out" the ILWU leader. The Bridges bombshell thus largely fizzled a mere few days after it had been lobbed. Meanwhile, George Cole, Regional Director of the CIO in Minneapolis, felt compelled to issue a public statement denying any knowledge concerning or responsibility for the charges made in the *CIO Industrial News* with respect to Corcoran and labor racketeering. Over the course of December 1937–January 1938 Minneapolis unions – both AFL and CIO affiliates – carried on a vigorous discussion about labor gangsterism, Pat Corcoran's murder, and their relationship, if any. Left-wing socialists who supported the Dunnes in union locals with a Stalinist presence were subject to verbal abuse, intimidation, and even beatings. It was all to no avail. The larger workers' movement exonerated the Trotskyists and Local 544 continued to gain support, winning strikes in the wholesale grocery sector and elsewhere, sustaining trade unionism across a wide swath of industrial sectors in Minneapolis. Robley Cramer, editor of the *Minneapolis Labor Review*, declared in April 1938 that, "There is not a newly organized union in this city but has received the help of Local 544 in getting on its feet."¹⁶⁰

This was the context in which John Dewey, reporting on the Preliminary Sub-Commission inquiring into the Moscow Trials, suggested the link between Stalin's frame-ups inside the Soviet Union and the practices of his followers in the United States. In an evening radio broadcast in mid-December 1937, Dewey alluded to the Corcoran murder and the Communist Party's attitude to it:

160 The above paragraphs draw on Tselos, "The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s," 439–440; *Northwest Organizer*, 2 December 1937; 9 December 1937; 23 December 1937; 30 December 1937; "CP Faking of Signatures Hit by Mpls. Unionists" & "Meeting of Business Agents Denounces Daily Worker Lies," *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937; "Militant Executive of Hosiery Union Slugged in Minneapolis" & "Corcoran Slain By Labor's Foes Says Cannon," *Socialist Appeal*, 11 December 1937; "Try to Bolster Midwest Frame-Ups with 'Confession' in Frisco; Plot Fizzles," *Socialist Appeal*, 11 December 1937; "Packinghouse Workers Repudiate Fake CIO," *Socialist Appeal*, 18 December 1937; "Grocery Drivers Win Strike in Minneapolis; CIO Director Repudiates CP; Carpenters Oust Stalinist Stooge" & "Bridges Pulls a Boner; Plot Fails to Thicken," *Socialist Appeal*, 25 December 1937; "San Francisco Labor Council Condemns Stalinist Frauds" & "Local 544 Victory Over Wholesale Grocers Hailed By Minneapolis Labor," *Socialist Appeal*, 1 January 1938; Carlos Hudson, "A Frame-Up That Failed," *New International*, 4 (March 1938), 73–75; "Workers Challenge Midwest Boss Drive Against Labor," *Socialist Appeal*, 23 April 1938. CIO Regional Director Cole would do something of a flip-flop, speaking out of both sides of his mouth to different audiences, but a coroner's inquest opening of his files confirmed that his statements against the Communist Party were fundamentally correct. See "Minneapolis Unionists Bring Suit for Libel Against Daily Worker," *Socialist Appeal*, 8 January 1938.

Already Communists and their sympathizers are asking us to believe that, because a Moscow court held Trotsky guilty of conspiring with Hitler and Japan, therefore Minneapolis workers friendly to Trotsky assassinated Corcoran. When unionists who are not in any way connected with Trotsky ridiculed the charge, they were at once denounced as Trotskyite stooges. This is a fresh example of the way what went on in Russia is used to disrupt the ranks of labor in this country. It won't be the last time. American labor and progressive groups are going to be asked over and over again to decide local questions on the basis of charges against Trotsky and Trotskyites in Moscow.¹⁶¹

Cannon and his comrades in the Minneapolis teamsters understood well the potential danger to the trade union movement posed by the Communist Party's cynical attempt to frame the revolutionary leadership of Local 544.

Local newspapers were quick to jump on the anti-labor bandwagon propelled by the loose and unfounded Stalinist allegations. The *Minneapolis Star* cited Communist Party-issued leaflets and reports in publications like the *CIO Industrial News* and *Daily Worker*, insisting that "charges made by union leaders" about Corcoran's murder being a consequence of labor racketeering constituted "the issue of most importance." The ideological waters were further muddied by irresponsible and unsubstantiated comment from inside the workers' movement that suggested a link between Corcoran's murder and intensifying AFL vs CIO tension. Voices of mainstream AFL laborism, like the *Minnesota Union Advocate*, implied that the killing could be attributed to the CIO, blaming "a lot of ordinary hoodlums who have been trying to propagate the John L. Lewis brand of unionism in the Twin Cities." The state's only overtly Stalinist paper, the Duluth-based *Midwest Labor*, intimated that the assassination was bound up with "friction between the AFL and CIO." One mainstream publication in St. Paul directed its readers to the *CIO Industrial News* if they wanted a disquieting "exposition" of Trotskyism and how mobsters were used in the unions. Stalinists appealed to Minneapolis Mayor Leach to investigate "gangster and racketeering elements in the [local] labor movement," while ignoring the key issues of identifying Corcoran's murderers and making those responsible pay for their criminal act. The Trotskyists blamed the aggravation of divisions in the ranks of labor at least in part on the Stalinist policy of annihilating leftist critics:

161 "Dewey Broadcasts on Trials; Hits Minneapolis Frame-Up," *Socialist Appeal*, 18 December 1937.

Blind to all except the task dictated to them by the GPU – get the Trotskyists by hook or crook! – the Stalinists have targeted the Minneapolis trade unions, have slandered a fallen leader, have seconded the boss propaganda, have made it possible for enemies of labor to assassinate other labor leaders and blame it on labor!¹⁶²

Cannon brought the meaning of the Corcoran affair to New York with a 17 December 1937 Friday night lecture at Webster Hall.¹⁶³

Aware of the danger posed by the Corcoran murder as an opportunity for a Stalinist witch-hunt of Local 544's Trotskyist leadership, Cannon also appreciated that such Communist Party machinations presented an opportunity for developing working-class consciousness, connecting international developments to national and local concerns. He provided Dunne a cartography of mobilization:

I think we could work up a very lively campaign in Minneapolis, as well as nationally. I have in mind a series of weekly meetings at which I would speak on the case and its implications; in which the frame-up record of the Stalin gang from Moscow to Minneapolis could be thoroughly elucidated. I understand that the Commission of Inquiry on the Moscow Trials plans to issue its report at a public meeting on December 12th in New York. That could be the occasion for an enormous meeting in Minneapolis. Another meeting could be held on Spain and the GPU record

162 "Labor Aroused by Midwest Murder: Rejects GPU Plans to Smear Unions," *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937; Carlos Hudson, "A Frame-Up That Failed," *New Internationalist*, 4 (March 1938), 73–75; Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 145; "Union Chief Slain in Twin-City Trap: Police Investigate Labor War Reports After Gunmen Ambush Minneapolis Labor Leader," *New York Times*, 19 March 1937; "CIO Says Gangs Rule Minneapolis," *New York Times*, 22 November 1937. See also James P. Cannon, "Who Killed Pat Corcoran – Why?" *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937, which prompted Richard M. Valelly to allege that Cannon as the leader of American Trotskyism, "hinted that the Soviet secret police had a role in the murder or at least in the political capital being made of the murder." See Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 145–146. That the GPU, in its Moscow Trials methods, had pioneered the "frame-up" tactics that the Communist Party in the United States and Minneapolis was applying to the Corcoran murder is undeniable, but Cannon never suggested these forces were in any way *directly* involved in the killing of the trade unionist. Rather, he stated that once Corcoran had been killed, the "agency of the GPU, the American contingent of the international frame-up and murder machine, otherwise known as the Communist Party, and sometimes in Minneapolis as the 'CIO', took a hand in the game." This was like "a troupe of actors getting their cues."

163 Advertisement, "James P. Cannon: The Stalinist Frame-ups from Moscow to Minneapolis," *Socialist Appeal*, 11 December 1937.

there and the murder of Nin. Another meeting on the assassination of Reiss and the revelations made by his wife concerning the orders of Stalin to organize frame-ups against the Trotskyites on a world scale. Another special meeting might be devoted to the subject of the trade unions and the move to place them under governmental supervision of which the present Stalinist campaign can be explained as a part.

Cannon's capacity to immediately grasp the "big picture" possibilities inherent in a situation had long impressed his Minneapolis comrades, and the tragic murder of Pat Corcoran undoubtedly confirmed this positive assessment. Helping Local 544 and its leadership to see the Corcoran murder and Stalinism's intention to use this against the Minneapolis Trotskyists in ways that transcended a merely defensive stance, Cannon saw the offensive possibility of placing the Communist Party in the bright glare of exposure. "I think we should go into the whole thing in a very militant and confident mood," Cannon finished a letter to Dunne, "The whole case has the makings of a big victory for us if we hit back soon enough and hard enough."¹⁶⁴

As Cannon noted at a 10 December 1937 Minneapolis meeting, the relationship of Corcoran and the revolutionary leadership of Local 544 was that of a united front in the interests of working-class advances. It proved that conservative trade unionists, if honest and open to seeing the class struggle clearly, even if they did not agree that its end must be socialism, could make common cause with those far to their left. This the Stalinists denied, denouncing those who criticized them as "Trotskyist-fascists." Cannon feared the escalating "lynch spirit" language could "lead to anything." The Minneapolis Communist Party might well go to extreme lengths to associate the hated Dunne brothers of Local 544 with gangsters who had no regard for the basic path of working-class solidarity. "The wailing and yelping of the Minneapolis Stalinists for a special police investigation to pry into the records of Local 544," thundered Cannon, revealed starkly this wrong-headed and potentially deadly orientation. It was an approach that could only confuse and disorient militant workers and undermine recognition of the fact that the "state and the police and the bosses are the enemies of the workers."¹⁶⁵

In the end, Corcoran's murder remained something of a mystery. Minneapolis labor repudiated the Stalinist attempt to turn the tragedy into a frame-up of the revolutionaries who had played such a decisive role in building the trade

164 Cannon to Dunne [no date, 24 November 1937?], Chrono File, November – December 1937, Folder WP: November 1937, from Walter Goldwater Papers, PRL.

165 "Corcoran Slain By Labor's Foes Says Cannon," *Socialist Appeal*, 11 December 1937.

union movement of the mid-to-late 1930s, not only with respect to Minnesota, but in eleven congruent states. One hundred and fifty union business agents met to denounce the Communist Party's rump "Voluntary Committee" and repudiate "an unscrupulous campaign by irresponsible elements to discredit and split the labor movement in Minneapolis." They pilloried the alliance of the mainstream press and the *Daily Worker* for working together "to smear and discredit the martyred Corcoran and the trade union movement, with the charge that his assassination was caused by 'racketeering and gangsterism'" within the labor movement. The *Northwest Organizer* reported that the Fiorotto brothers and Bellini, former pillars of Tobin's Local 500 who briefly held minor staff positions in Local 544 were discharged from the union in disgrace for dishonorable conduct. The business agents passed a series of resolutions rejecting the "foul slander on the *bona fide* labor movement and its martyred officer," which only "shields the real murderers and the dark forces behind them." The Stalinists, this body declared, were "in no way representative of the attitude of organized labor."¹⁶⁶

The sorry denouement of the Corcoran affair unfolded in January 1938, with Local 544's Vincent Ray Dunne, Miles Dunne, Grant Dunne, Farrell Dobbs, and Bill Brown bringing a libel suit against the Communist Party's *Daily Worker*. Cannon himself had broached the idea of such a legal action in late November 1937, which perhaps indicates how much the Moscow Trials, the murder and frame-up of Stalin's leftist opponents internationally, and the Communist Party's attempt to use Corcoran's assassination to smear its trade union opponents, had distorted his principled political vision. He was not alone in this lapse of judgement. Shachtman wrote Cannon in early December 1937 that the National Committee discussed the legal action and was of the view that, "we should by all means institute suit for libel against the *Daily Worker*." Cannon wrote to Dunne that, "I think we have a good basis for a libel suit against the DAILY WORKER, possibly also against the local Stalinist CIO gang." He initially considered using the legal action as "one of the central jumping off points for our counter campaign," an idea that was not followed through on. Ultimately, the claim directed against the *Daily Worker* was that the Minneapolis Trotskyists and their allies in the labor movement had been slandered maliciously in 16 separate instances, and that the Communist Party constituted a "conspiracy to injure their reputations among the workers of the whole country and particularly of Minneapolis." Understandably irate that the Stalinist press insinu-

166 Carlos Hudson, "A Frame-Up That Failed," *New Internationalist*, 4 (March 1938), 73-75; "Meeting of Business Agents Denounces Daily Worker Lies," *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937.

ated that the plaintiffs were “behind the trigger-men who killed Corcoran,” the legal action, in which Albert Goldman served as counsel for the teamster leaders, was seen as retaliation against misrepresentations that depicted them as “Trotskyite racketeers, gangsters, gunmen, associates of the employers and the underworld.”¹⁶⁷

It was all wasted effort – and worse. When they had roasted the Stalinists for appealing to the police, the courts, and the state to intervene in the trade union movement to cleanse labor of its ostensible gangsterism, the Trotskyists in Minneapolis provided a fundamental lesson in class politics: organized workers can never rely on class enemies to resolve struggles within their own ranks. When the Dunne brothers, Dobbs, and Brown turned around and sued the Communist Party and its publication, the *Daily Worker*, in the same courts they had previously asserted must be kept out of labor’s internal affairs, they violated this very same essential principle. The result could only have confounded rank-and-file workers: if it was wrong for the Communist Party to call on the state and its judicial apparatus to intervene in union matters, why was it acceptable for Local 544 to use this same machinery against the Stalinists? Moreover, what would victory in such a libel suit accomplish? Nothing the Communist Party said about the Trotskyists could possibly have had any impact on the reputations of respected Minneapolis trade union leaders like Ray Dunne and Bill Brown, Stalinism having already plumbed the depths of denigration in all manner of scurrilous indictments and dismissals, none of which came close to achieving credibility. Local 544’s leaders did not need the seal of approval of a bourgeois court – their record was all the proof they needed of their status as working-class militants.¹⁶⁸

167 “Minneapolis Unionists Bring Suit for Libel Against Daily Worker,” *Socialist Appeal*, 8 January 1938; “Minneapolis Teamsters Sue ‘Daily Worker’ for Libel; Complaint Lists Repeated Stalinist Slanders Against Union,” *Socialist Appeal*, 19 January 1938; “Libel Suit Against *Daily Worker* Shifted to Mpls,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 July 1938; Cannon to Dunne, 23 November 1937; Cannon to Dunne [no date, 24 November 1937?], Chrono File, November – December 1937, Folder WP: November 1937, from Trotsky Papers, Harvard University and from Walter Goldwater Papers, PRL; Shachtman to Cannon, 2 December 1937, Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers. That the libel action eventually proceeded suggests that Cannon and others never relinquished their views on bringing the Communist Party into the courts, but that in the actual campaign to resist Stalinist attempts to present the murder of Corcoran in ways that would discredit Local 544 and its Trotskyist leadership events moved at such a pace that the suit was put on the backburner.

168 Cannon’s opting for use of the courts against the *Daily Worker* and the Communist Party occurred before Trotsky codified the absolute necessity of following a course of independence of trade union struggles and the state. See Leon Trotsky, “Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay,” *Fourth International*, 2 (February 1941): 41: “It is necessary to adapt

The legal tussle simply dragged itself out, not being settled until 15 May 1940. At that point, the issue of slandering the Trotskyist labor leadership of Minneapolis long forgotten, the *Daily Worker* acknowledged that its published charges were without merit. Withdrawing them, as was done, probably meant next to nothing, the situation facing Local 544 and its leaders having changed dramatically with the passage of time and climate of war preparedness.¹⁶⁹

Bill Brown did not live to lift a glass in celebration of the “victory” over the Stalinists. He was killed in late May 1938 by Arnold Johnson, who was a friend and a veteran of the 1934 strikes. Employed by Local 544 as an organizer, Johnson was out drinking with Brown when he apparently was overcome with depression related to the strain of overwork.¹⁷⁰ He shot Brown in what all

ourselves to the concrete conditions existing in the trade unions of every given country in order to mobilize the masses not only against the bourgeoisie but against the totalitarian regime within the trade unions themselves and against the leaders enforcing this regime. The primary slogan for this struggle is: *complete and unconditional independence of the trade unions in relation to the capitalist state.*” The issue with respect to suing the CP, then, was not whether, in some juridical sense, the Stalinists had overstepped the boundaries of legitimate criticism and proceeded into legal territory of libel. They clearly had. But this was not the point. The fundamental issue for Cannon to have addressed was whether the Communist Party was still a part of the broad workers’ movement, because within that movement it was long established that to use bourgeois courts to settle disputes was illegitimate. Trotsky’s arguments about the trade unions were germane, because revolutionaries had to battle ossified officialdoms and union bureaucracies that used all manner of offensive methods of suppressing opponents, ranging from lies and intimidation to outright physical violence. It was necessary to find ways of combatting this ugliness, which often violated not only societal norms but lawful behavior. But the police, the courts, and the state clearly represented the class enemy of the working class and the revolutionary left and turning to them to resolve disputes within the workers’ movement could only weaken solidarity and class struggle.

169 On the libel settlement agreement see Tselos, “The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s,” 441. Local 544’s legal action against the *Daily Worker* was paralleled by an employer-initiated suit against Local 544. Feeding off the allegations of gangsterism and its corollary, “misuse of union funds,” supposed agents of the employers inside the Drivers’ Union sued the Local for monies that it was claimed were owed them. The three-year ordeal involved a judicial forensic audit of Local 544’s financial records, which were paraded before the public, only to have “a hostile judge ... give the union and its leaders a clean-bill of health.” This “Fink Suit” was thus terminated in the courts in October 1940. See Preis, *Labor’s Giant Step*, 136; Carlos Hudson, “Teamsters Defy Court Order to Reveal Records,” *Socialist Appeal*, 6 August 1938; Felix Morrow, “Labor in Northwest Rallies to Local 544 in Court: Militant Stand of Drivers’ Union Wins Thirty-Day Stay of Court Order to Open Books for Bosses,” *Socialist Appeal*, 13 August 1938.

170 For a study of a later period and the way in which the workplace conditions violence, see Jeremy Milloy, *Blood, Sweat, and Fear: Violence at Work in the North American Auto Industry, 1960–1980* (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2017).

who knew him could only consider a bout of intense, if temporary, insanity, Johnson's recollections of the event incoherent and uncomprehending. A brief flurry of yellow journalism, stirred up with planted reports, denunciations from religious pulpits, and some Communist Party intrigue, attempted to reanimate claims of racketeering and gangsterism, but to no avail. Even the Stalinists evinced little enthusiasm for another go around on the allegations of December 1937, which had backfired so spectacularly and largely exhausted the patience of Minneapolis working-class militants.

By the time of Brown's killing, Local 544 had managed to create a powerful Left-wing inside the Central Labor Union. This hegemony, building since the CIO was barred from the Minnesota Federation of Labor and the Minneapolis Central Labor Union, was solidified throughout the late fall and winter of 1937–38 when the Communist Party discredited itself with its dubious claims about Corcoran's murder, orchestrated to depose the Dunne brothers, Dobbs, Skoglund, and Brown. With the CIO in Minneapolis marginalized, its strength in some sectors waning and its weaker and often chimerical unions garnering less and less support, few AFL leaders had time for the sectarian hostility exhibited by the Communist Party toward tried-and-true trade union icons who built Local 544. Brown's death, then, unlike Corcoran's, elicited no serious and sustained effort at any frame-up.¹⁷¹ Among the thousands who attended Brown's funeral was James P. Cannon, who had a special fondness for the militant trucker with an irrepressible sense of humor and a boundless appreciation of and commitment to labor's cause.¹⁷²

171 On Brown's death see Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 188–197; “Organizer Kills Brown in Insane Fit; President of Minneapolis Drivers’ Union Shot by Demented Union Employee; Great Crowd Honors Him at Funeral” & Carlos Hudson, “Minneapolis Labor Pays Final Tribute to Brown; Thousands Gather at Headquarters of Drivers’ Local 544 for Last Rites Honoring Murdered Union Leader,” *Socialist Appeal*, 4 June 1938. On the influence of the Communist Party and the CIO unions in Minneapolis in 1937–38 see Tselos, “The Minneapolis Labor Movement in the 1930s,” 441–442; Smemo, “The Politics of Labor Militancy in Minneapolis,” 103–108; Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 144–151. The hegemony of the Trotskyist-led Left-wing in the Central Labor Union is discussed in “Twin Cities Progressives Score Smashing Victory: Splitters Swept From Top Bodies; Elections Drive them from Central Labor Organs in Midwest,” *Socialist Appeal*, 19 February 1938. To the extent that Brown's death was commented on in the press in ways that revived the allegations of trade union racketeering that proliferated after Corcoran's murder see Dobbs, *Teamster Power*, 195–196; and Valelly, *Radicalism in the States*, 148, which cites *St Paul Pioneer Press*, 27 May 1938. Note, as well, “Dunne Debates Parson on Gangsterism Charge,” *Socialist Appeal*, 9 July 1938.

172 Cannon wrote a warm obituary for Brown: James P. Cannon, “Bill Brown: A Proletarian Fighter,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 July 1938.

12 Trotskyism on the Line: Footholds in Mass Production and the CIO

Trotskyists, along with Musteites and Communists, pioneered the militant industrial union organizing that exploded in the 1934 strike wave. These labor upheavals anticipated the subsequent 1936–37 eruptions of mass production workers, whose center of mobilizing gravity soon became the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The French turn in America thus coincided with an upturn in the class struggle that presented Trotskyists with fresh opportunities to engage in mass work in the labor movement. Cannon's intervention in the maritime struggles of the Pacific Coast and in defending, consolidating, and extending the achievements of the Minneapolis teamsters were highly significant parts of this, but his activity unfolded, ironically, within older, if radicalizing enclaves, of the American Federation of Labor.

The rising CIO unions were nonetheless central players in the labor upheaval of the 1930s, and what Trotskyists inside the Socialist Party could undertake in the struggles of the time was constrained by both their small numbers and the hostility of the far more numerous and well-placed Communist Party activist-organizers. Cannon nonetheless later acknowledged that the 1936–37 years witnessed a virtually unplanned, but sophisticated, orientation to trade union work that was unprecedented in the short history of American Trotskyism. This labor activism, outside of Minneapolis and the west coast, was most developed in the automobile industry. Bert [Burke/Burt] Cochran [E.R. Frank], recruited to the Left Opposition out of college by Max Shachtman, had been part of a dissident "Young Communist League Committee for the New Communist Party," editing its *Bulletin* in February 1934. Recruited to Trotskyism, he cut his teeth as a CLA City Organizer in New York during the mid-1930s. Moving to Michigan (and later Ohio) in 1935, Cochran, alongside George Clarke, worked with a talented layer of former Musteites (Ted Selander, Art Preis, and Sam Pollack) to solidify a militant presence in automobile assembly plants and parts factories. Cannon regarded this activity as an important foundation "laid for a powerful fraction of Trotskyists in the automobile workers' union."¹⁷³

Cochran, barely twenty-four years of age when he helped settle a tool-and-die makers strike by the AFL-affiliated Mechanics Educational Society of America [MESA], had already attained a certain stature in Detroit, Cleveland, and Toledo by the mid-1930s. The MESA membership, something of an "aristocracy

173 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 251–252; *The Bulletin For Members of the Communist Party and Young Communists League Only, Published by the C.P. and Y.C.L. Committee for a New Party*, 1 (26 February 1934).

of automobile workers, whose wages had been driven down to decidedly unaristocratic levels,” was in revolt against both the cost-cutting bosses and the dues-driven AFL International Association of Machinists. The prohibitive initiation fees and exorbitant monthly dues of the craft unionist IAM alienated the increasingly militant but somewhat exclusivist precision machinists in the auto sector, who formed MESA in 1933. Many of the new union’s founders had experience in other left mobilizations, such as the Communist Party, the British shop stewards’ movement, or the Independent Labor Party. Eschewing entrance charges and holding monthly dues to a minimalist 25 cents, the rebellious tool-and-die makers were prone to go it alone, without involving the mass production workers. Despite this short-sightedness, MESA strikes successfully broke through auto employers’ refusals to bargain collectively and emerged with a reputation for having challenged the open shop system. As a result, the organization’s ranks expanded considerably. By 1935–36, MESA was agitating for sit-down strikes in the auto plants.

A volunteer industrial organizer for the CLA/Workers Party, Cochran began work in Detroit, but soon became involved in the auto sector in Ohio, where he chaired the Socialist Party’s Labor League. Working with MESA, but focused on the needs of “amalgamation” and the creation of “One Big Union” in auto, Cochran rubbed the leaders of the early United Automobile Workers [UAW] the wrong way, and he was excluded from the union’s 1935 Convention. Yet, the young Trotskyist was sufficiently on the radar of radical journalists that when Louis Adamic toured the country, seeking information on various industrial sectors for writing assignments with the *Nation*, he wrote to Cochran asking his views and advice on the automobile industry. Cochran was in touch with Trotskyist trade union authorities/Workers Party leaders like Arne Swabeck, A.J. Muste, and Cannon, keeping them abreast of developments. *Labor Action* covered developments in the auto industry scrupulously, no doubt fed information and articles by Cochran. His closest confidante within the Trotskyist ranks was George Clarke, then a New York-based founding member of the CLA expelled from the Communist Party’s youth group in 1928. An early recruit to Cannon’s corps of itinerant organizers, Clarke had been dispatched to the Illinois coal fields in the early 1930s, where he struggled, as we have seen earlier in this book, to build a Communist League presence against the odds, eventually relocating to Chicago and then New York. From there Clarke encouraged Cochran to stick it out in the auto sector, convinced that the industry and places like Detroit were pivotal in the class relations of the new regime of Fordist accumulation. From his desk at the *Militant*, Clarke saluted Cochran and another comrade, Bill Kitt, as “trail-blazers for the party.” He considered their work extremely important for “the internal situation in the Party now and the

future, on the whole conception of 'volunteer' field organizers and on a host of other things." Eventually Clarke moved to Detroit to join Kitt and Cochran.

Cochran and Clarke were part of a cohort of young, dedicated, Cannon-inspired field workers dispatched to build up Trotskyism in the industrial districts of the United States. One of the most talented and successful of Cannon operatives, Cochran tried to get the Socialist Party to support MESA picket lines, only to be rebuffed on the grounds that it was important to avoid ruffling AFL feathers. Riding the tide of militant activism, the young Cochran, who had relocated to Cleveland, was under consideration for a post as a MESA District Organizer. He saw, however, that the future lay not with the small, if dynamic tool-and-die makers' body, but with the more inclusive industrial unionism of the UAW. Cochran resigned from MESA in mid-February 1937 to join the Homer Martin-led auto workers. He reported to Swabeck that, "I have succeeded in swinging my local of the MESA into the Auto Workers. Under the agreement which we drew up, we receive the Vice-Presidency of the Clev. Council and a member of the Executive Board. ... I may secure an International organizer-ship."¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ The above paragraphs draw on a variety of sources. For discussions of MESA see Cochran, *Labor and Communism*, 68–71; Christopher H. Johnson, *Maurice Sugar: Law, Labor, and the Left in Detroit, 1912–1950* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), esp. 138–148; Harry Dahlheimer, *A History of the Mechanics Educational Society of America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1941). On Cochran and MESA see Unnamed File, largely relating to 1937, in Cochran Papers, Box 1. This Unnamed File contains much on the MESA as well as relevant correspondence, including Adamic to Cochran, 18 January 1935; Clarke to Cochran, 22 August 1935; Swabeck to [Bill] Kitt and Cochran, 25 January 1935; 7 February 1935; 9 February 1935; 27 February 1935; 11 March 1935; 11 April 1935; 29 April 1935; Swabeck to Cochran, 9 May 1935; 19 July 1935. On WP/SP united front work at the time of the 1935 auto strike, and Cochran's role in this, see further correspondence in this Unnamed File, Ralph Saul to SP, 2 May 1935; Arthur Kent to WP, 6 May 1935. On the Cochran role in bringing his MESA lodge into the UAW see Cochran to Swabeck, 12 February 1937, Unnamed File. As an example of the Clarke correspondence with Cochran, undated but probably from sometime in 1935, see Clarke to Burke, no date [1935], Unnamed File. On Cannon's young field operatives, a model of relating to recruits to the movement he borrowed from Vincent St. John's practices in the Industrial Workers of the World, see Sam Gordon and Art Sharon, in Evans, ed., *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, 63, 88. On the coverage of auto struggles and developments in the Trotskyist press see "Auto Union Pushes on Under CIO; Demands Conference with GMC Heads Over Recognition," *Labor Action*, 2 January 1937; "Union Asks Automobile Showdown: Martin Again Demands Conference with GM," *Labor Action*, 9 January 1937; "Truce Broken By Double-Cross of General Motors; Sit-Down Strikers Hold Plants at Flint As Knudsen Walks Out of Scheduled Conference with Union," *Labor Action*, 23 January 1937; "Roosevelt Shows Colors to Labor in Automobile Crisis," "Tool Men Win Strike in Detroit," & "Socialists Aid Auto Strikers," *Labor Action*, 30 January 1937; "Auto Workers Crack General Motors: CIO Unions Big Victory Begins Wide Advance,"

Inside the UAW, Cochran, Selander, and others found it tough sledding. The Communist Party was already deeply entrenched in the John L. Lewis-led CIO endeavors in the auto sector, and fighting to create spaces for Trotskyist organizational possibilities was difficult, especially in Detroit and its environs. A "Report on Work in the United Automobile Workers of America," likely written sometime in 1938, conveyed something of the problems, as well as the strategy the Trotskyists sought to pursue to address them:

The present top leadership of the UAW consist of a combination of Lewis men and Stalinist supporters, who have established for themselves an unbroken record of incompetence, laziness, and reactionary politics, and who, along with Martin and his crowd bear full responsibility for the disastrous state of the UAW today. Our policy was therefore directed towards the creation of a third force in the union, which stood on a militant progressive union building program and opposition to the bureaucratic methods and conservative policies of the Stalinists, as well as of the Lewis-CIO-machine.

Only our lack of decisive influence in any large, important local union has prevented our party from making truly sensational gains in the UAW at the present time. The third group's program and our present policy of building a broad, progressive, anti-Stalinist bloc points the way, however, for the rebuilding of the Auto Union and the increase of our party influence and strength.¹⁷⁵

From their industrial base in auto, Cochran, Clarke, et al were firm supporters of Cannon's entrism orientation. Cochran had been kept apprised of developments in 1936 as the Workers Party prepared to join the Socialist Party.¹⁷⁶ Cannon, "proud of the work you have done in the field," advised Cochran in February 1936 of the necessity of a certain diplomacy in dealing with SP militants in the auto and unemployed fields as discussions around entry hardened.¹⁷⁷

Labor Action, 20 February 1937; "Sit-Down Strikes Sweep from Coast to Coast," *Labor Action*, 27 February 1937; "Chrysler Sit-Down Concluded: Lewis Promises No More Stoppages of Work," *Labor Action*, 17 April 1937.

175 "Report on Work in the United Automobile Workers of America," [1938?], Unnamed File, Box 1, Cochran Papers.

176 Indications of Cochran's support for Cannon in his ongoing 1936–1937 confrontations with the New York "Club" include Cochran to Swabeck, 8 October 1936; Cochran to Swabeck, 12 February 1937, Unnamed File, Box 1, Cochran Papers.

177 Cannon to Cochran, 10 February 1936, Unnamed File, Box 1, Cochran Papers.

With a Trotskyist presence in auto coalescing in 1937, Cochran and Clarke thought it was their turn to offer some advice. They suggested to Cannon that *Socialist Appeal* pay more attention to “the American political and class struggle scene,” complaining that the paper was “entirely too disproportioned – a great hindrance to effective promotion and naturally also to our work.” Motions to rebrand the *Appeal* were endorsed in auto sector branches of the Socialist Party where the *Appeal* group was strong. In November 1937 correspondence, Vincent Ray Dunne confirmed that in Minneapolis, as well, there was similar concern about the *Appeal*, although Dunne was more forgiving that the Trotskyist leadership was aware of the problem and was trying to rectify it. “We feel the need sharply every hour of the day for an organ more acceptable to the mass worker,” conceded Dunne, adding that, “The *Appeal*, in my opinion, should be transformed into a broad sheet, and be much more of the type of paper that *Labor Action* was in its short life.” Shachtman concurred: “It is absolutely imperative, especially in the coming period, to orient our work in such a manner as to insure the maximum contact of all of our comrades with the trade union movement and in general, with work in the mass organizations and movements.” Clarke complained that articles he sent to the *Appeal* did not manage to make it into print and the movement’s divorce “from the political life of the country” was reflected in the fact that “none of the ideological struggles that have developed in our group have concerned themselves with questions of the American class struggle.” He suggested that it was a “false kind of internationalism that devotes itself to the study of questions on the other side of the Atlantic to the **complete** exclusion of the burning questions in the United States.” Decrying “crackpots,” “misanthropes,” “genuinely confused elements,” “hopeless sectarians,” and others “stifled by the New York milieu,” Clarke pressed for a “**new orientation**” melding the discussion of “foreign questions” with attention to “the mass movement” in which the Trotskyists needed to be “better rooted.” Clarke jokingly proposed to Cannon that he was considering starting a “one-man faction ... on the proposition that every member of the Political Committee spends at least four months out of every year in the field.”¹⁷⁸ It was clear that Trotskyist industrial organizers and their comrades in the New York headquarters had somewhat different impulses.

¹⁷⁸ Clarke to Cannon, 23 November 1937; 29 November 1937, Chrono File, November – December 1937, Folder WP: November 1937, from Walter Goldwater Papers, PRL; Dunne to Cochran, 25 November 1937; Shachtman to Cochran, 1 December 1937, Unnamed File, Box 1, Cochran Papers. The discontents of Clarke, Cochran, Dunne, and others about the *Socialist Appeal*’s character and its lack of labor coverage undoubtedly related to the lapsing of the Cannon-edited *Labor Action*, which did far more to address class struggles, not only in

Clarke was enthused about the prospects in the auto sector, having consolidated the Detroit-based Auto Workers Education League [AWEL] as a UAW militant caucus organized “for the purposes of promoting class struggle policies and rank-and-file democracy.” One member was John Anderson, a former Wobbly recruited to Trotskyism out of the Socialist Party who was active in UAW Locals 210 and 15, at McCord Radiator and Fleetwood. The AWEL played “a direct and influential role” in an unauthorized sit-down strike at the General Motors Pontiac Fisher Body Assembly plant, 30 miles from Detroit, where workers engaged in a rebellious and “illegal” plant occupation in a desperate attempt to address pent-up grievances. General Motors was outsourcing work, reducing pay checks or forcing thousands of workers to subsist on relief, while simultaneously speeding up the assembly line, imposing the four-day work week, gutting the collective agreement, and encouraging foremen to run roughshod over any objections.

When yet another round of layoffs was announced for 15 November 1937, the night shift stopped work and sat-down on the job. Four union committeemen left the occupied plant the next day for corporate headquarters in Detroit, with assurances that their concerns could be aired and a negotiation process commenced. Work resumed on this basis; but instead of discussions the stewards and bargaining committee representatives were fired. This infuriated the disgruntled auto workers and five hundred of them once again shut down production, this time taking the precaution of welding the gates shut and moving food and blankets into the plant. A five-hour long meeting the next evening, which featured plenty of denunciations of UAW President Homer Martin and derision of General Motors, secured the endorsement of thousands of Pontiac workers for the factory seizure.

This spontaneous sit-down, provoked by egregious corporate abuses, was orchestrated by an inexperienced group of shop floor militants. Their local union leaders, elected under the old AFL charter, were “reactionary to the marrow,” and had no sympathy for such rebellious initiatives. Homer Martin’s anti-Communist Progressive Caucus, which offered no support, was strong-armed by John L. Lewis to get the sit-downers back to work. The Unity Caucus, led by the Socialist Party’s Walter Reuther and championed by Communists and fellow-travelers like Wyndham Mortimer, did not do much, although in behind

Minneapolis and the Michigan-Ohio automobile sector, but throughout the nation. See, for instance, “Strikers Beat Down Thug Attack; Deputized Gun Men Fire Upon Workers; Agricultural Wage Slaves Organize Drive Against Open Shop,” *Labor Action*, 1 May 1937, which addresses “the perennial civil war in agriculture” in California, a subject covered regularly in the paper.

the scenes meetings of the UAW officialdom, its advocates argued for authorizing the strike, immediately evacuating the Fisher Body plant, and reinstatement of the fired committeemen. But there is no evidence of any significant intervention in the conflict by the Unity Caucus, and Mortimer stated publicly that the UAW was not endorsing the action. While the top leadership of the union was not sure what to do in Pontiac, Mortimer made it clear that the UAW Board was unanimous that "unauthorized strikes must be stopped."

Clarke, Anderson, and others from the AWEL showed up in Pontiac, along with Cochran and Selander from Ohio. They were all welcomed with open arms by the sit-downers, who recognized they had gotten themselves in over their heads and had few backers within the union hierarchy. The Trotskyists helped them organize a strike committee, attempted to "steel the strikers against the inevitable betrayal," and when Martin eventually appeared to order an end to the outlaw occupation, helped prevent "the retreat from turning into a rout." Clarke reported in the aftermath of Martin's authoritarian action that an "inevitable reaction" set in: new batches of stewards were being sacked by the company with nary a protest from UAW headquarters. The Martin leadership took control of the Local and imposed "a one-man dictatorship of Charles Madden, reactionary Executive Board Member":

We on our part, are consolidating a progressive group in Pontiac (a section of the Auto Workers Educational League). Anywhere up to a dozen of the leading militants will probably participate. And it is not entirely excluded that we shall also get a branch of the party out of this group. Whatever the outcome of this effort is, the Pontiac strike is our first real intervention into the auto situation. We can be proud that the 'Trotskyites' were the only political group possessing the necessary courage and correct policy to throw in their wholehearted support into the first great 'untouchable' situation in the UAW. And the only group to furnish leadership.

"Variously damned and praised in ever growing circles of the union," Clarke's view was that Trotskyist activities in the UAW had leapt to a new level. He noted that neither the Communist nor Socialist Parties were anywhere to be seen during the Pontiac strike, and that while Martin was stabbing the struggle in the back, Reuther and Mortimer sat on their hands, locked away in their hotel rooms. "The issue was entirely too hot for them. The betrayal of this strike will undoubtedly begin a new crystallization in which we stand to make substantial gains."¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ The above paragraphs draw on Clarke to Cannon, 23 November 1937; Clarke to Cannon,

Not everyone agreed. Clarke's account of the sit-down and the supposed veneration of the Trotskyists by militants in Pontiac, elicited a muted response from Cannon and Shachtman. In the same issue of the *Socialist Appeal* that featured Clarke's report of Martin's scuttling the strike, James Casey offered a disconcerting account of a new, intensified capitalist crisis. More lay-offs were predicted, as a worsening economy threatened to result in soaring prices and rising unemployment. Cannon and Shachtman took this late 1937 news to heart and urged Clarke to scale back agitation and to moderate articles he was sending to New York. Obviously pleased with the inroads their cadres were making in auto, the senior Trotskyists warned of the dangers of overreaching. "We must not holler too insistently about strikes and so on," wrote Cannon, suggesting it would be best to concentrate on "bureaucracy and reactionary policies" in the union. "[W]e must be very careful about agitating for strikes when the workers will be under such disadvantage in the slack season," Cannon advised. Shachtman was even more directive, arguing that the economic and trade union situation in late 1937 pointed "unmistakably to prudence in strikes in auto right now," and that it would be a mistake to "encourage" more or less isolated job actions in the industry. Cautioning against being "too radical," Shachtman thought that Clarke's reports on auto workers should "lead the reader in the direction of our point of view," rather than agitate for specific actions, because there was no organization with the capacity to provide on-the-spot leadership in the struggles.¹⁸⁰

29 November 1937, Chrono File, November – December 1937, Folder WP: November 1937, from Walter Goldwater Papers, PRL. See also Clarke's account in "Pontiac Workers Forced to Quit by Martin Machine," *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937. The Homer Martin Progressive Caucus, the Walter Reuther Unity Caucus, and the Pontiac sit-down are discussed somewhat differently in Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 104–131. The *Daily Worker*, 2 December 1937, quoting Communist Party organizer William Weinstone, declared: "the Communists and the Communist Party have never in the past and do not now in any shape, manner or form advocate or support unauthorized and wildcat actions." For a discussion of a division within the Communist Party, pitting Earl Browder against William Z. Foster around the issue of the Popular Frontist suppression of the sit-downs in 1937 see Edward P. Johanningsmeier, "The Profintern and the 'Syndicalist Current' in the United States," in Norman LaPorte, Kevin Morgan, and Matthew Worley, eds, *Bolshevism, Stalinism, and the Comintern* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 297–298. In an anti-Cannon and anti-Cochran statement in 1954, Raya Dunayevskaya described Cochran as someone who did not organize the mass of workers but the advocates of the Party: "Cochran's specialty was not to organize masses, but caucuses." See Dunayevskaya, "Bert Cochran, Caucus Builder," *Correspondence*, 6 February 1954.

180 Cannon to Clarke, 26 November 1937; Shachtman to Clarke, 3 December 1937, Chrono File, November – December 1937, Folders WP: November 1937 & December 1937, PRL.

No doubt feeling a bit chastened, Clarke acknowledged that Cannon was right in advising against “indiscriminate agitation for strike action at the present time,” but argued that Pontiac sit-downers had blazed a path that might well pay big dividends for the UAW’s small and isolated left wing:

... well-planned and effective strikes in key spots are not only inevitable but necessary even though we are hitting a slough in the industrial cycle. The strikes may be defeated. But if General Motors and Chrysler get away with their present attacks the end of the UAW may very well be in sight. Already a tremendous decline is taking place. Dues are falling off and workers are throwing away their union buttons in increasing number. It is highly probable, if not certain, that the Ford drive will end in a fiasco unless a new economic rise occurs and brings with it another great wave of strikes. A few more strikes, like at Pontiac – naturally better prepared and better planned – will have a very telling effect in two ways: 1. They will assure thousands of shop stewards and committeemen – these are the fighting backbone of the union – that it is still possible to resist the corporations and in that way receive protection. 2. The bureaucracy will undoubtedly outlaw these strikes with the active or tacit support of the CP, SP, and the Lovestoneites – which will have as a result a new left wing crystallization in the UAW with us playing a very prominent part. Up til now the chief obstacle to the growth of our influence in the UAW, besides the smallness of our forces, has been the aura of militancy and opposition to Martin that surround the Stalinist-Reuther crowd. ... Their discreditment will proceed in direct ratio with the development of the struggle both inside the union and with the capitalists.¹⁸¹

Cannon praised Clarke’s accomplishments, and noted that the “small beginnings” in establishing a progressive group constituted “great potentialities in the big conflicts that are looming up.” He also observed, “We had to fish around a long while on the west coast before we got as far as you have already attained.”¹⁸² Yet despite this positive assessment, the gap had not narrowed much between the New York center and its agents in the auto sector.

Clarke and Cochran proposed a mid-December 1937 conference in Toledo or Detroit, to bring together trade unionists and workers in mass organiza-

181 Clarke to Cannon, 29 November 1937, Chrono File, November – December 1937, Folder WP: November 1937, from Walter Goldwater Papers, PRL.

182 Cannon to Clarke, 26 November 1937, Chrono File, November – December 1937, Folder WP: November 1937, from Walter Goldwater Papers, PRL.

tions, the purpose being to lay out an agenda in these fields in preparation for the late December Chicago conference of dissident, expelled, and left-wing forces inside or once associated with the Socialist Party. Shachtman damned the idea with effusive praise, pandering to Cochran's and Clarke's suggestion that such a Toledo or Detroit meeting of activists might go a long way toward insuring that the later and larger Chicago conference not revolve "exclusively around the Russian and Spanish questions," even though these international issues were "vitally important." Noting that the kind of meeting Cochran and Clarke were advocating would accent the need "to do some practical work in the class struggle in this country," Shachtman suggested that perhaps the day after their proposed conference Cochran and Clarke might travel to a Steel Workers Organizing Committee meeting in Pittsburgh. There "contacts might be made with the rank and file militants." Vincent Ray Dunne, taking a more direct approach, simply begged off attending any such conference, since in Minneapolis they were consumed with the Corcoran affair. He also made the practical observation that it was not realistic to expect trade unionists to attend two conferences within a three-week period in the middle of December, noting that the expense would severely strain the resources of the nascent Trotskyist organization. Tellingly, as well, while Dunne agreed with Cochran and Clarke that "discussion and planned work in the trade unions and mass organizations" was imperative, he and other leading comrades consulted (probably including Cannon) did not consider it advisable to "relegate to a secondary place the questions of world importance for revolutionary Marxists." Dunne agreed with Cochran on much, including the necessity of reviving work among the unemployed, and suggested that union and mass work activists might be able to meet in Chicago just prior to the scheduled left-wing convention.¹⁸³

Buffeted by developments in the Socialist Party, the relentless struggle to expose the Stalinist show trials, and the international crisis of the left arising from events in Spain, as well as important trade union issues including those posed by Pat Corcoran's murder, Cannon had a lot on his plate by late 1937. His battles with the New York "Club" subsided after his return to New York and reintegration into the national center; Cannon devoted his energy to the

183 Shachtman to Clarke, 3 December 1937, Chrono File, November – December 1937, Folder WP: December 1937, from Walter Goldwater Papers, PRL; Shachtman to Cochran, 1 December 1937; Dunne to Cochran, 25 November 1937, Unnamed File, Box 1, Cochran Papers. On Trotskyist work among the unemployed that developed subsequently in Minneapolis, Cleveland, and New York see "Cleveland Authorities Wrangle While Unemployed Starve," *Socialist Appeal*, 28 May 1938; "City Wide Relief Sit-In Called for New York," *Socialist Appeal*, 11 June 1938; "St. Paul Unions Demand Idle Factories Be Opened, Operated Under Workers' Control," *Socialist Appeal*, 27 August 1938.

aggressive pursuit of the opportunities for a burgeoning movement. By the time that Cochran and Clarke established a foothold in the auto sector, Cannon was looking forward to consolidating a new, independent Trotskyist organization. His priorities thus shifted from those of 1936-early 1937, in which the work of agitation and building recruits to revolutionary socialism was paramount, to those of mid-to-late 1937, wherein the consolidation of the advances registered over the course of the last year were now central.

Cannon tried to convince Cochran to relocate from Cleveland to the New York office, explaining to his protégé in mid-August 1937 that the national center was extremely short-staffed: the Trotskyist Appeal Group had a registered support of some 500 Socialist Party and YPSL members, with perhaps 200 more recruits being a possibility. A body this large needed a strong and competent guiding organizational hand, aided by a local staff, if it was to consolidate within a new Trotskyist movement. Cannon proposed to the New York leadership that if Cochran moved to the center, he would direct certain vital operations as well as further and deepen his own development as a leading comrade. Some opposed removing Cochran from "the auto situation," where he was "the central figure in our connection in this important field," but Cannon disagreed:

Work in the center is the main school for the development of leading comrades. Experience in the field is necessary; in my opinion it is almost indispensable for the rounded education of a party leader. But an active comrade soon reaches the point where the field work has nothing more to teach him until he has gone through a period of experience in the center where he has to focus his mind more and more on national and international questions and test himself out in collaboration with other comrades of the leading body. After that one can go back into field work with a much richer equipment and political self-confidence. He will also be able to see more and to learn faster.

There was an autobiographical element to this advice, supplemented perhaps by a concern that Cochran was narrowing his revolutionary perspective unduly:

Field work, too long protracted, tends to arrest political development of the individual rather than broaden it. This is doubly true of trade union field work. One becomes parochial-minded. He gets buried under a multitude of little things and postpones consideration of the most important. He loses perspective, sense of proportion and even in some cases a

sense of humor, mistaking his irritation over a raft of petty annoyances for revolutionary indignation against the monstrosity of capitalism as a world system.

Cochran's participation in the national co-ordination and administration of the movement from the New York center, according to Cannon, was important for the future prospects of American Trotskyism. Moreover, it would not harm trade union initiatives already underway, Cannon stressing that the successful consolidation of an expanded organization in the months to come would soon translate into help for the "comrades in the outposts with both men and material aid." He asked Cochran to think about the offer, talk it over with his comrades in Ohio, and get back to him.¹⁸⁴

Nothing came of the proposal to have Cochran move to New York. Clarke shifted back to the national center in the summer of 1938, assigned to co-edit the *Socialist Appeal*. Cochran managed to secure a paid organizer's position with the UAW sometime in 1937. Cannon kept in touch with Cochran, and in their correspondence attempted to focus Cochran's attention on the political as opposed to the industrial side of his work in Michigan and Ohio, where the itinerant Trotskyist was working his way into UAW President Homer Martin's good graces.¹⁸⁵ Cannon did not discount trade union work; on the contrary, he valued it highly, favoring funding and developing a District Organizer in the

184 Cannon to Cochran, 18 August 1937, Unnamed File, Box 1, Cochran Papers. Cannon may also have been influenced by a report to him by Frankie Stern, who worked closely with Cochran in the Cleveland auto sector, that "Party" development in Ohio was lagging because "Cochrane, who is the natural leader of the left wing is so tied up in trade union work that he has not been active in the party to any extent whatever." Stern also noted that Cochran had made inroads with a group of Great Lakes sailors, with whom he was working to form a caucus. See Frankie Stern to Jim and Rose, [no date, 1937], Reel 4, JPC Papers.

185 Cochran and the Trotskyists were undoubtedly aware that Martin opposed the fellow-travelling elements of the auto union leadership, such as Wyndham Mortimer and, in lesser ways, the SP's Walter Reuther, as well as the somewhat different Richard Frankenstein, but that Martin could also align with them in stifling rank-and-file militancy. See the critical commentary on the Martin-Reuther-Frankenstein leadership in "UAWA Leaders Bow Down to GM," *Socialist Appeal*, 29 January 1938. By early February 1938, however, Martin's increasingly vehement opposition to the Communists around the question of war preparation – with CPUSA leader, Earl Browder promoting "collective security" of the Soviet Union in ways that pushed the United States into possible armed conflict with Japan – coincided with Trotskyist opposition to imperialist war. See "Auto Workers Leader Slams War Mongers," and "What Is Collective Security?" *Socialist Appeal*, 12 February 1938; "Down with the War Mongers!" *Socialist Appeal*, 19 February 1938; "Comintern Prepared to Support Imperialist War," *Socialist Appeal*, 2 April 1938; "Unions Declare Anti-War Stand:

auto sector, even providing an automobile, "the use of the party car as a nest-egg." Either Clarke or Cochran, in Cannon's view, were suitable candidates for the job. But Cannon continued to push Cochran to develop as a Party leader, asking him to contribute more to the *Socialist Appeal*. Fixated on developing "a stronger cadre of party workers," Cannon clearly saw Cochran's great potential, but trade union work in the automobile sector was a tricky business, the maze of repugnant practices and dubious perspectives put forward by the main established groups inside the UAW a confusing swirl in which caucus formation and independence from the labor fakirs was paramount. In February 1938 he wrote to Cochran:

I think you are correct in your idea that our antagonism to the Martin forces, and their contemptible lawyers, the Lovestoneites, should be somewhat different than our attitude to the Stalinist war mongers. And to a certain extent we should enter into loose combines with them against the Stalinites. The most important thing is to develop a clearly independent group that doesn't soft pedal the fight against Martin and Co. They and the Stalinists are in the same category fundamentally, the difference is only one of degrees. I think this should be our general approach to the problem which should regulate all tactical maneuvers.

In this spirit, Cannon had a cautious attitude to taking appointed posts within the trade unions. This derived from his awareness of the danger of becoming ensnared by the bureaucracy. He did not rule out accepting such appointment (with Clarke holding down an officially-sanctioned organizer's post for a time), but he was wary of the pitfalls. Of the view that a "Bolshevik can take care of himself under practically any circumstances," Cannon nonetheless warned Cochran that if he took appointment,

I hope you are going to make it clear right from the start that you're not merely a hired hand raiser who's going to defend everything. It is not worthwhile for you to have such a position unless it will improve your possibility to influence the general line of strategy. It seems to me imperative that you have a serious talk with Martin and his close friends and see if you can't give them some ABC education in the proper manner of conducting a fundamental political struggle

Minneapolis Leads the Way!" *Socialist Appeal*, 2 April 1938. This helped pave the way toward a brief Trotskyist-Martin bloc discussed below.

To assuage Cochran's feelings, Cannon added a postscript to another letter: "My remark about 'hand-raisers' was just a rhetorical flourish. You know how it is with us orators."¹⁸⁶

Over the course of 1937–38 the Trotskyist presence in auto grew. Although never able to steer policy at the national level, there were points in time when these leftist militants exerted what they thought was considerable influence. In mid-May 1938, for instance, a 20-point activist program was adopted unanimously by the UAW's Executive Board in an attempt to solidify Homer Martin's beleaguered presidency by outflanking his Communist Party-aligned factional opponents and others inclined to follow the Stalinists, such as Reuther, with what appeared to be a left-wing activist agenda. Cochran later recalled that many of the proposals "originated with a number of Trotskyists and dissident Socialists who had been in the Unity faction," and Clarke suggested in 1940 that a confluence of events made it possible, for the first time, to "conduct an open struggle against the Stalinists which the workers could understand." The left-wingers sent a delegation to Martin, and persuaded him to adopt some of their draft action program, which the UAW President subsequently revised significantly, before submitting it for approval to the Executive Board.¹⁸⁷

Martin was committed to battling the Stalinists, but for very different reasons than were the Trotskyists. He pledged to "guarantee the locals their autonomy and the rank and file democracy and to conduct a militant fight against the corporations." He also apparently accepted the necessity of rejecting the Stalinist propaganda about "collective security," and agreed to work with the Trotskyists on an anti-war campaign. Cochran was hired by Martin as a Detroit-based UAW-Works Project Administration [WPA] director. Desperate to stave off Stalinist attempts to depose him, Martin found an alignment with Clarke and Cochran temporarily expedient, while the two Trotskyists apparently hoped that supporting the sitting UAW President would give them space to advance

186 Cannon to Stern, 11 January 1938; Cannon to Cochran, 5 February 1938; Cannon to Cochran, 16 February 1938; Cannon to Cochran, 18 February 1938; Cannon to Cochran, 22 February 1938; Cannon to Clarke, 25 June 1938; Cannon to Cochran, 29 June 1938, Unnamed File, Box 1, Cochran Papers. Cochran was ostensibly fired by Martin during the first UAW strike that took place with Cochran in a union official's position. See Raya Dunayevskaya, "Bert Cochran, Caucus Builder," *Correspondence*, 6 February 1954.

187 The context of the brief bloc of auto Trotskyists and Martin was undoubtedly the Stalinist offensive inside the UAW Executive Board, which Cannon and the others presented as a drive to take over the union that could well result in debilitating consequences. See "Stalinists Start Drive to Capture or Smash United Auto Workers," *Socialist Appeal*, 7 May 1938; James P. Cannon, "Workers! Unite All Forces Against the Union Wreckers!" *Socialist Appeal*, 14 May 1938; "Martin Balks Frankenstein Plot in UAW," *Socialist Appeal*, 14 May 1938.

their class struggle politics inside the union. They were perhaps overawed by the adoption of specific clauses of their 20-point program, and described acceptance of the modified Martin version as an “instantaneous success” which “swept the union with the power of a new dispensation.” This was a gross inflation of the reality of the 20-points, as a thorough dissection of its content reveals.¹⁸⁸

188 The 20-point program, as adopted by the UAW Executive Board, was reproduced in “UAW Adopts 20-Point Program of Activity,” *Socialist Appeal*, 21 May 1938:

1. Recognition by all members of the International Union of the responsibility and authority of the International Executive Board and the International officers, subject to the Constitution, which is the basic law of the Union between conventions.
2. The guarantee of democratic rights of local unions, consistent with the Constitution and the welfare of the membership of the International Union as a whole.
3. Maximum responsibility in carrying out joint agreements with employers.
4. Cooperation of all officers and members of the Union in the prevention and elimination of wild-cat stoppages and strikes.
5. Continued efforts to elevate standards of living, improvement of working conditions, and reduced hours of work.
6. Mobilization of the entire Union against wage reductions and undermining the gains already achieved.
7. Vigorous drive to obtain closed shop contracts in all plants within the industry.
8. Launching of comprehensive drive to organize competitive plants.
9. Full mobilization of the Union in support of all legitimate authorized strikes.
10. Intensive activities in behalf of federal and state legislation in the interests of Labor.
 - a) Federal Wage and Hour Bill
 - b) The Wagner-Healy Act
 - c) Federal housing legislation
 - d) Federal Appropriations for relief
11. Opposition to anti-union legislation, such as
 - a) Sheppard-Hill Bill or May Bills
 - b) Amendment of National Labor Relations Act
12. Strengthening of drive to organize aircraft workers of the nation.
13. Active prosecution of Ford organization drive on nationwide scale.
14. Intensification of campaign to organize WPA workers.
15. Building of strong local and International treasuries as a reserve of strength to the Union, by avoidance of all unnecessary expenditure, to provide maximum available funds to carry on organizational activities.
16. Maximum participation of all local unions in Labor Non-Partisan League. In Michigan, support for Governor Murphy for re-election.
17. Pledges of continued whole-hearted support to the policies and principles of the Committee for Industrial Organization, including regular and prompt payment of per capita tax as a fixed obligation of the International Union.
18. Constant resistance to war propaganda and cooperation with all sincere efforts to keep America out of war. Support of LaFollette-Ludlow amendment as a guarantee of Labor's democratic right to determine whether or not it will wage a war of aggression abroad.

To be sure, this 20-point program advocated union democracy and expanded struggles beyond wages and job conditions into rejecting war propaganda. It also promised to intensify and widen organizing to new industrial sectors such as aircraft workers, pushed to unionize unorganized plants, and expand nationwide campaigns, as well as moving the UAW more aggressively into building collective resistance among those receiving relief through the Works Projects Administration. Yet in its Martin-revised form, the 20-point program, as a blueprint for mass action that could be embraced by revolutionaries, was undeniably neutered, as was recognized immediately in a 21 May 1938 *Socialist Appeal* article that headlined the union's error in uncritically embracing the Michigan Democratic Party leadership. For the 20-point program unambiguously advocated continuing electoral support for the governor of the state, Frank Murphy. There was also a carefully worded stipulation that officers and members of the union must cooperate in the "prevention and elimination of wild-cat stoppages and strikes," an unmistakable blow struck against militant workplace actions. Even the anti-war clause was largely a pacifist statement. In a February 1938 letter to Cochran, Cannon warned (prior to the elaboration of the Cochran-Clarke draft program and before any consideration of the 20-point program was possible) against adapting uncritically to the Socialist Party's "Keep America Out of War" agitation, in which isolationists such as Lafollette were lauded.¹⁸⁹ The 20-point program was never more than a prop for Martin, a career business unionist without any serious commitment to class struggle politics, yet it was, for all of its flaws, clung to by the Trotskyist auto fraction as a foundation on which to battle Communist Party influence inside the UAW.¹⁹⁰

The program contained clauses that undoubtedly made the Stalinists squirm, and it had enough of a leftist and agitational tone to impress many rank-and-file workers. But any Trotskyist content that might have appeared in the original had been so diluted as to be unrecognizable. For Martin the

19. Program of close cooperation between organized industrial workers and organized farmers. Encouragement of bona fide cooperative movements.

20. Assumption by all International offices of full responsibility for carrying out the program and policies of the International Union.

189 "Stalinists Put to Flight by UAW Board; Frankenstein-Browder Combination Collapses Completely; Union Errs in Supporting Governor Murphy," *Socialist Appeal*, 21 May 1938; Cannon to Cochran, 22 February 1938, Unnamed File, Box 1, Cochran Papers.

190 "CP Stooges Suspended by Mart to Forestall Bid for U.A.W. Control," *Socialist Appeal*, 18 June 1938; "Stalinist Wreckers Act Concertedly to Smash Auto Workers' Union," *Socialist Appeal*, 25 June 1938; "SP Advances Phony UAW Peace Plan: Martin not Battling Wreckers," *Socialist Appeal*, 2 July 1938.

program was a maneuver, useful for an immediate moment and its needs, but not something he was likely to abide by, for the UAW head was incapable of staying a steady course. Abetted by his Trotskyist bloc partners, Martin threw them a nasty curve when, a month after securing endorsement of the 20-point program, he simply jettisoned it. In a panic that the Stalinists were gaining ground and that he was losing his majority on the Executive Board, Martin suspended five UAW officials he suspected of possible disloyalty. Among them were Richard Frankenstein, a former Progressive Caucus Martin ally who defected to the Communist Party-supported Unity Caucus. Martin's precipitous removal of Board members prompted a walk-out of the remaining Unity Caucus led by Walter Reuther, the divisions culminating in public trials of the figures originally targeted, who included Mortimer, Frankenstein, and George Addes. In the midst of this upheaval, Martin turned over the reins of office in the union to incompetent lieutenants, some of them Lovestoneites, and disappeared onto the banquet circuit. This unleashed a new and invigorating round of factionalism in which the Stalinists were able to legitimately claim that they were victims of Martin's arbitrary, undemocratic actions.

Now on the defensive, Martin attacked the base, where discontent seethed: local charters were revoked; trusteeships imposed; alliances with reactionaries consolidated. Striking out at the Trotskyists directly, Martin summarily removed Cochran from office, thereby terminating the left-winger's work with unemployed UAW members in Detroit. A strike at the McCord Radiator Local 210, in which Trotskyist John Anderson played a leading role, was betrayed by one of Martin's henchmen. Over the course of July to December 1938, Trotskyist "criticism of Martin constantly sharpened its tone." A *Socialist Appeal* editorial early raised the salient criticism: in battling the Stalinists, Martin's abandonment of elementary union democracy showed "how *not* to fight." "The best way and the *only* way of breaking the Stalinist hold upon the membership is boldly and confidently to go *to* the membership, explain the issues involved, guarantee a democratic and militant organization and expose the reactionary unprincipled and unscrupulous work of this gang of union-wreckers and splitters." At the end of 1938, the Trotskyist auto fraction was forced to abandon its previous policy of pursuing a bloc with Martin and, despite small numbers and marginal influence, struck out on the path of building an opposition in the union. Cochran announced at a meeting of the auto fraction on 25 December 1938 that, "Our line in auto is changed today, the orientation being against the administration of the UAW. Our aim today is that of building a new progressive group with the objective that this group may win the leadership of the union. ... when our forces grow we may find allies in the SP in Detroit, groups in

the West Side Local and Briggs Local who were part of the Unity Group – and organize a loose alliance with them for a progressive group on the basis of our program.”¹⁹¹

- 191 The above paragraphs draw on many sources. On the 20-point program and the rise and fall of Trotskyist relations with Homer Martin the best source is perhaps George Clarke, “The Truth About the Auto Crisis: The Petty-Bourgeois Leaders Before the Test of Class Struggle,” Unpublished typescript, 4 March 1940, esp. 19–20. On the background developments of Stalinist attack on Martin and Martin’s eventual disemboweling of his Board see “Stalinists Start Drive to Capture or Smash United Auto Workers; Frankenstein, Browder’s Candidate to Replace Homer Martin, Issues Open Challenge; Would Crush Union Democracy,” *Socialist Appeal*, May/July 1938; “Martin Balks Frankenstein Plot in UAW,” *Socialist Appeal*, 14 May 1938; “Stalinists Put to Flight by UAW Board; Frankenstein-Browder Combination Collapses Completely; Union Errs, However, in Supporting Governor Murphy,” *Socialist Appeal*, 21 May 1938; “CP Stooges Suspended by Martin To Forestall Bid for UAW Control; Frankenstein and Four Others Are Affected by Order; Stalinists Violate Agreement to Observe 20-Point Program,” *Socialist Appeal*, 18 June 1938; “The Fight in the Auto Union: An Editorial,” *Socialist Appeal*, 9 July 1938; “Auto Workers Threatened by Splits as Wreckers Force Fight for Power,” *Socialist Appeal*, 25 July 1938; “Union Busters Peril U.A.W.: Plan Rump Convention to Split Union,” *Socialist Appeal*, 20 August 1938; “Stalinists Riot as Trial of Suspended Chiefs Begins in UAW,” *Socialist Appeal*, 30 July 1938; George Clarke, “The Crisis in the Auto Workers Union,” *Socialist Appeal*, 17 September 1938. Cochran’s comments on the 20-point program are in Cochran, *Labor and Communism*, 368, n. 15. Cochran would have been aware of how Wyndham Mortimer and other Unity Caucus members sympathetic to the Communist Party did their best to keep wildcat strikes and sit-downs under control. See Roger Keernan, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Unions* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980), 190. There were those who saw in the Trotskyist intervention in the auto sector in this period opportunistic errors. See Harold Robins, “Some of Our Opportunist Mistakes in the Auto Union,” [1938?], Typescript in File 3, “Automobile,” Box 2, Cochran Papers. Clarke wrote to Cochran in late July 1938 that a worker (he was dubious about whether or not this individual did not have established political connections) had written to Trotsky “complaining about our line in the UAW. The letter beefed about our connection to/with Martin, who was tied up with Lovestoneites and reactionaries, said we were indistinguishable, etc. ... the Old Man was wrought up over the letter and concerned about our line. ... Max also was of the opinion a few days ago that we should discontinue pleading with Martin in our press to take this or that step and call directly on the progressives to do these things. I believe there is a certain merit in this criticism ... I think it an important point to judge at precisely what stage we stop bringing public pressure on Martin and say a ‘plague on both your houses.’” Clarke to Cochran, 30 July 1938, Unnamed File, Box 1, Cochran Papers. Dunayevskaya, “Bert Cochran, Caucus Builder,” *Correspondence*, 6 February 1954, claimed that Cochran drafted the original 20-point program and that, “Martin got from Cochran the program to fight the Communists, and Cochran got from Martin the post of UAW-WPA director.” This history, shorn of any appreciation of Trotskyism’s modest contribution, is also covered in Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 104–131; and, in an account highly partisan toward the Communist Party, Johnson, *Maurice Sugar: Law, Labor, and the Left in Detroit*, esp. 219–244.

Cannon, who it seems had no hand in drafting the original 20-point program or even advance notice of its substance, recognized the dilemma posed for left wingers in auto. The Stalinist “wrecking crew” had to be opposed (and Cannon may not have given enough credit to Mortimer, Frankenstein, Robert Travis, and Henry Kraus – Unity Caucus members on the UAW Executive Board – when he labeled them as simply Stalinist stooges), but Martin’s “harebrained stunts” undermined internal democracy in a union where rank-and-file involvement in decision-making was guarded “jealously.” Speculating about rumors of Love-stoneite influences on Martin (later confirmed), Cannon thought “Martin’s action in trying to expel 49% of his Executive Board ... a characteristic Love-stone stunt. That’s the way he used to proceed in the Communist Party before he fell victim to a heavy dose of his own medicine.” Instead of using this situation to impress on Cochran and others the need to break decisively from Martin, and bury the opportunistic reliance on the watered-down 20 points as some kind of connection to the UAW figurehead, Cannon at first (before Martin had revealed the depths of his penchant for self-destruction) dug himself in deeper. Possibly he hoped to retain some sliver of authority in the International Union hierarchy to continue the fight against the Stalinists. In Cannon’s view, all Martin had to do was follow up the 20-point program. A commitment to “the democratic and progressive sentiments of the ranks,” and carrying the war to the Stalinists in ways that betrayed no “bureaucratic monkeyshines,” could have “mobilized a big majority in the union.” Martin would then have been able to dispense “with his Stalinist opponents by rank and file action.” Given Martin’s open attack on the UAW Executive Board, however, all possibility of this outcome was scuttled. Cannon then stressed to Cochran that some kind of peace proposal had to be brokered organizationally, one that made no principled concessions to the Stalinists, but that signaled Martin’s willingness to make “a partial retreat.” Without such an effort to extricate himself from his “indefensible position,” Martin was vulnerable to “any kind of a demagogue” who could well “gain support for any kind of a proposition against him.” Cannon found the situation frustrating. He did not want to advise Cochran to do anything to “help the Stalinists directly or indirectly.” Equally important, “neither do we want to become attorneys for Martin and feel obliged to defend every stupid action on his part which plays the game of the Stalinites.”

If the Trotskyists did not become attorneys for Martin, they did seek to provide him counsel. Cannon pressed Cochran, who had not yet been fired from his Martin appointment, to “try by all means” to influence Homer Martin to abide by the agreement, and back off his precipitous attack on the Executive Board, however much the officials were indeed Stalinists or their uncritical allies. There was never any political basis for imagining that Martin, who had

his own agenda, could be talked into becoming a “progressive.” Cochran already realized that, “Cooperating with Martin was like trying to catch a wraith in a hailstorm.” When the 20-point program was ignominiously ditched, it was blindingly obvious that there had never been a political basis for a principled on-going bloc with Martin.¹⁹²

Trotskyist influence in the UAW after this 1938 Martin meltdown was generally restricted to the Local level. In 1939, a set of nine proposals for building the UAW drafted by Cochran and other Trotskyists was officially adopted by five locals, two in Detroit where John Anderson was active, and three in Cleveland, where Cochran had considerable support. The proposals were bandied about in the upper reaches of the UAW and at the union’s Convention, but hardly won over the leadership.¹⁹³ Kermit Johnson and Genora Johnson Dollinger, pioneering militants of the Flint sit-down strike and embattled Socialist Party veterans of the UAW factional wars against Stalinists and Lovestoneites, found their way to Trotskyism in this period.¹⁹⁴ This was in part because the Trotskyists were now patiently and routinely addressing the crisis of leadership in the UAW. By detailing the ways in which both Unity and Progressive caucuses thwarted union democracy, Trotskyist dissidents in auto drew militants toward them. All wings of the trade union officialdom, from anti-communists like Martin and Lewis to the more seemingly progressive Reuther and Mortimer, were exposed as putting a damper on militancy and class struggle politics. Genora Johnson, wooed by CP surrogates such as Wyndham Mortimer, was also cultivated by Cochran, who was on hand to drive her from Cleveland to Akron, where she was addressing UAW audiences in the aftermath of the Flint sit-down strike.

192 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon to Clarke/Cochran, 25 June 1938; Cannon to Cochran, 29 June 1938, Unnamed File, Box 1, Cochran Papers; Cochran, *Labor and Communism*, 368, n.15. For a statement on the UAW Executive Board factionalism of this period, authored by one of the Board members dismissed, that places considerable accent on the Lovestone influence over Martin, see Wyndham Mortimer, *Organize! My Life as a Union Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1971), 142–165; and, for a brief account of the lead-up to and consequences of the 1938 UAW Board suspensions see Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 124–129.

193 See, for instance, Victor G. Devinatz, “The Role of the Trotskyists in the United Automobile Workers, 1939–1949,” *Left History*, 10 (Fall 2005), 55–56; Dunayevskaya, “Bert Cochran, Caucus Builder,” *Correspondence*, 6 February 1954.

194 George Clarke, “Genora and Kermit Johnson, Leading Auto Workers, Quit SP, Join SWP” & Genora and Kermit Johnson, “Statement,” *Socialist Appeal*, 19 November 1938; Sol Dollinger and Genora Johnson Dollinger, *Not Automatic: Women and the Left in the Forging of the Auto Workers’ Union* (New York: Monthly Review, 2000); Carlton Jackson, *Child of the Sit-Down: The Revolutionary Life of Genora Dollinger* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2008), 40–54.

The Communist Party, with Reuther alongside of it, assailed the Progressive Caucus UAW presidency of Homer Martin. To be sure, Martin's mercurial and jaded regime brought the UAW to the brink of rupture in 1938–39, but the Unity Caucus Stalinists and Reuther did their best to push the buttons of political implosion as well. Cannon, now convinced of the folly of any opportunistic blocs, urged all workers to unite against the “wreckers.” He was adamant on the necessity of exposing how Martin, Reuther, Lewis and others were actively undermining the strength of industrial unionism by appealing to Roosevelt and trusting in the local state of Governor Murphy rather than relying on and building the militancy and solidarity of the automobile workers themselves.¹⁹⁵

The Trotskyists tended to counter-pose the fractiousness of the UAW to the potential for cooperation between AFL affiliates and CIO unions, exemplified in the Akron rubber plants and the Minneapolis labor movement. In the former, where there was a small group of Trotskyists led by B.J. Widick, or in the latter where the Dunne brothers and others stitched together cordial relations with genuine activists in all kinds of unions, the accent was placed on building labor defense guards to combat recalcitrant employers, scabs, and the rising threat of anti-union fascist blackguards.¹⁹⁶

As the UAW Executive Board unraveled under Martin's divisive misleadership, Cannon worried that John L. Lewis might be called in to broker some kind of realignment. He wrote to Cochran:

It is also absolutely imperative to fight the move to bring in Lewis as receiver. I think it would be fatal for the progressive forces to entertain this idea even for a moment. The entrance of Lewis into the situation, if he were officially recognized by the majority of the Executive Board in such a capacity, would spell the end of the independence of the Auto-

195 George Clarke, “The Crisis in the Auto Workers Union,” *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937; “Stalinists Try to Oust Martin from UAW Post,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2 April 1938; “Workers Resist Scab-Herding Police in Detroit: Force Closing of Screw Plant,” *Socialist Appeal*, 9 April 1938; James P. Cannon, “Workers! Unite All Forces Against Union Wreckers,” *Socialist Appeal*, 14 May 1938; “Union Busters Peril UAW: Plan Rump Convention to Split Auto Union,” *Socialist Appeal*, 27 August 1938.

196 “Boss Offensive Arouses Akron: Washington Acts Behind Scenes to Spike Union Vote” & “Minneapolis Electrical Workers Vote to Strike,” *Socialist Appeal*, 26 March 1938; B.J. Widick, “9,000 Rubber Workers Quit Akron Plants,” *Socialist Appeal*, 28 May 1938; “Striking Goodyear Workers Fight Police Terror, Score Gains,” *Socialist Appeal*, 4 June 1938; B.J. Widick, “The Lessons of Akron: Organize Workers’ Defense,” *Socialist Appeal*, 4 June 1938; “Akron–Detroit–Newark: The Workers Can Make Only One Answer,” *Socialist Appeal*, 11 June 1938; “Mpls. Unions Show Method of Ending AFL–CIO Dispute,” *Socialist Appeal*, 18 July 1938; “Labor Under Attack: The Only Answer,” *Socialist Appeal*, 30 July 1938.

mobile Workers Union. He would only act as a holding company for the Stalinists and turn it over to them. You must hammer in this respect very strongly on the experience of the west coast. That experience proves very clearly that Lewis is willing to play ball with the Stalinists wherever he thinks they have the power. ... he double-crossed the sailors as soon as he got the idea that the Stalinists had more strength and were willing to play with him.

Yet Cannon still clung to some illusion that Trotskyist cadre in the auto sector could exercise influence over the trade union officialdom. Cochran was advised to have Martin issue some kind of radio broadcast declaring that the UAW was "an autonomous independent organization that is going to run its own affairs and is not going to tolerate any receivership from any source whatsoever."¹⁹⁷

The work in the automobile sector was soon to emerge as a factional football in the internal dispute that erupted among Trotsky's American followers in 1939. Work in the auto sector was hoisted on the petard of an acrimonious division of the forces of United States Trotskyism that unfolded within the newly formed Socialist Workers Party. Cannon was forced to address an internal "auto crisis,"¹⁹⁸ one that he helped create by following too passively the possibility of a Cochran-Clarke orchestrated bloc with Martin, for which there was no solid political basis. Then, when this alliance imploded, Cannon's counsel tilted undeniably in the direction of pressing Cochran to advise Martin as to how best mollify an untenable situation. This situation was impaled on the horns of a dilemma clearly driven by antipathy for the activities of Communist Party

197 Cannon to Cochran, 29 June 1938, Unnamed File, Box 1, Cochran Papers. See also "UAW Fights Lewis Invasion: Locals Condemn Plan to Set Up Dictatorship," *Socialist Appeal*, 3 September 1938; "UAW Fights Lewis Invasion," *Socialist Appeal*, 3 September 1938; George Clarke, "The Crisis in the Auto Workers Union," *Socialist Appeal*, 17 September 1938; John Adamson, "Fate of the UAW Lies with Rank and File Workers," *Socialist Appeal*, 8 October 1938.

198 Brief comment on the "auto crisis" of 1939 can be found in Devinatz, "The Role of the Trotskyists in the United Auto Workers, 1939–1949," 56; Chris Knox, "Revolutionary Work in the American Labor Movement: 1920s–1950s," in International Bolshevik Tendency, eds., *The Transitional Program: The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (London and Toronto: Bolshevik Publications, 1998), 112; James P. Cannon, *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* (New York: Pioneer, 1943), 56, 66–68, 70, 77–78, 202, 280, 286. The fullest and best discussion of the "auto crisis," which exonerates Cannon from any culpability, and accents procedure over policy in the unfolding of the crisis, is George Clarke, "The Truth About the Auto Crisis: The Petty-Bourgeois Leaders Before the Test of Class Struggle," Unpublished typescript, 4 March 1940. The crisis and Clarke's document will be discussed in the next volume of my study of Cannon.

militants and those among the UAW leadership influenced by them, however much the favor was returned by Stalinists and fellow-travelers. It was indicative of how a drift toward Stalinophobia in 1937–38 skewed the perspective not only of Trotskyist auto sector operatives, but of Cannon himself.¹⁹⁹

Cannon, for instance, pilloried the Communist-dominated unions of this time, citing the example of the National Maritime Union. It descended from a union “raised up through heroic struggles of militant and self-sacrificing seamen” to a “servile belly-crawling” tool of the bosses, “signing ... agreements which shame the labor movement,” ruled by a repugnant regime given to “bureaucratic terror and expulsions,” prone to follow every “twist and turn of Communist Party politics” as issued from Moscow. As valid as this hard-hitting, published denunciation of Stalinism in the trade unions may have been, and as absolutely necessary as was Cannon’s call for militants in the UAW to recognize and resist Communist Party attempts to utilize the labor movement for its purposes and even to take over unions, Cannon’s language had a vitriolic edge. In the context of the Stalinist frame-ups of the 1930s and Popular Front dismemberment of revolutionary possibility, so evident in the tragedy unfolding in the Spanish Civil War, it is easy to understand how an element of Stalinophobia could creep into Cannon’s political calculations. He likened Communist Party activity among the automobile workers to a pernicious disease that had to be quarantined because the Stalinists were “a greater danger to the trade union movement than all the bosses.”²⁰⁰ This kind of hyperbolic statement, which falsely placed the Communist Party outside the workers movement, would

199 I use the words “drift to Stalinophobia” carefully and reflectively. I am not arguing that Cannon had been overtaken by the sense that Stalinism and it alone was the most pernicious development facing the revolutionary left in this period. But there were indications that Cannon in these years, confronted with so much of Stalinism’s destructive consequences, at times lost his political moorings in lapses of judgment, turning to opportunistic means in addressing the Communist Party’s abandonment of class struggle politics. This did not negate the extent to which the bulk of what Cannon contributed to the revolutionary left in these years was positive, even above reproach. Among the instances where Cannon’s judgment could be said to falter were: 1) his suggestion that the Minneapolis teamsters sue the Communist Party for libel; 2) his tendency to underestimate and caricature the significance of Communists in the CIO unions, reducing their place to that of “wreckers”; 3) an at times uncritical, opportunistic willingness to bloc with or attempt to influence trade union bureaucrats such as Homer Martin; and 4) statements such as the one quoted in the next paragraph that essentially located the Communist Party outside of the workers movement. See also his unpublished, sarcastic send-up, Cannon, “Six Reasons Why Maritime Workers Should Join the Communist Party – If I’m Wrong, Sue Me,” Typescript, “Speeches and Writings, 1927–1942,” Reel 35, JPC Papers.

200 James P. Cannon, “Workers! Unite All Forces Against the Union Wreckers!” *Socialist Appeal*, 14 May 1938.

come back to haunt Cannon, first in the “auto crisis” of 1939, and then in the major factional struggle over “the Russian Question” which forever separated Cannon and Shachtman. But in 1937–38 all of this was difficult to discern and impossible to foresee. It was obscured in the exhilaration of those buoyed by the prospects of a future alive with the formation of a new revolutionary organization, the Socialist Workers Party, a body poised to become the brightest star on the horizon of Trotsky’s Fourth International.



FIGURE 27 Norman Thomas, Socialist Party, 1937
WORLD WIDE PHOTOS, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 28 Norman Thomas (far left) and Travers Clement (middle/mustache), Socialist Party, 1940
ACME NEWSPICTURES PHOTO, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 29 Socialist Party, 19th Convention, Cleveland, 23 May 1936
ACME NEWSPICTURES PHOTO, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 30 Moscow Trials Poster, Socialist Party, 1937

MAX SHACHTMAN PAPERS, TAMIMENT LIBRARY, NP.221, OVERSIZE



FIGURE 31 Spanish Civil War Protest, Harold Robins in Centre, 1937-1938
MAX SHACHTMAN PAPERS, TAMIMENT LIBRARY, NP.087, BOX 1, FOLDER 10

ALL OUT MAY DAY!

OFFICIAL
ORGAN
SOCIALIST
PARTY
U.S.A.

Socialist Call

Entered as Second-Class Matter March 21, 1933, at the Post Office at New York under the Act of March 3, 1879

Vol. III—No. 111

NEW YORK, N. Y., SATURDAY, MAY 1, 1937

PRICE FIVE CENTS



Solidarity With Spain

FIGURE 32 Socialist Call, Solidarity with Spain, May Day 1937
SOCIALIST PARTY, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 33 Harry Lundeberg, Sailors Union of the Pacific
ACME NEWSPICTURES PHOTO, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 34 Striking Seamen Vote to Return to Work, San Francisco, 3 February 1937
ACME NEWSPICTURES PHOTO, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR

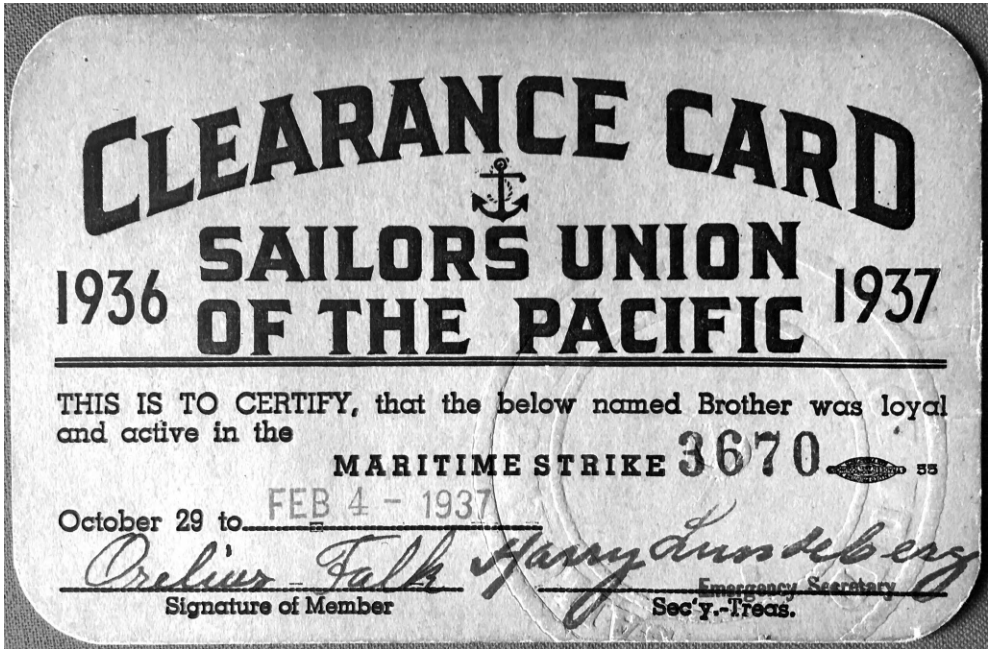


FIGURE 35 Sailors Union of the Pacific, Maritime Strike Clearance Card, 1937
IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR

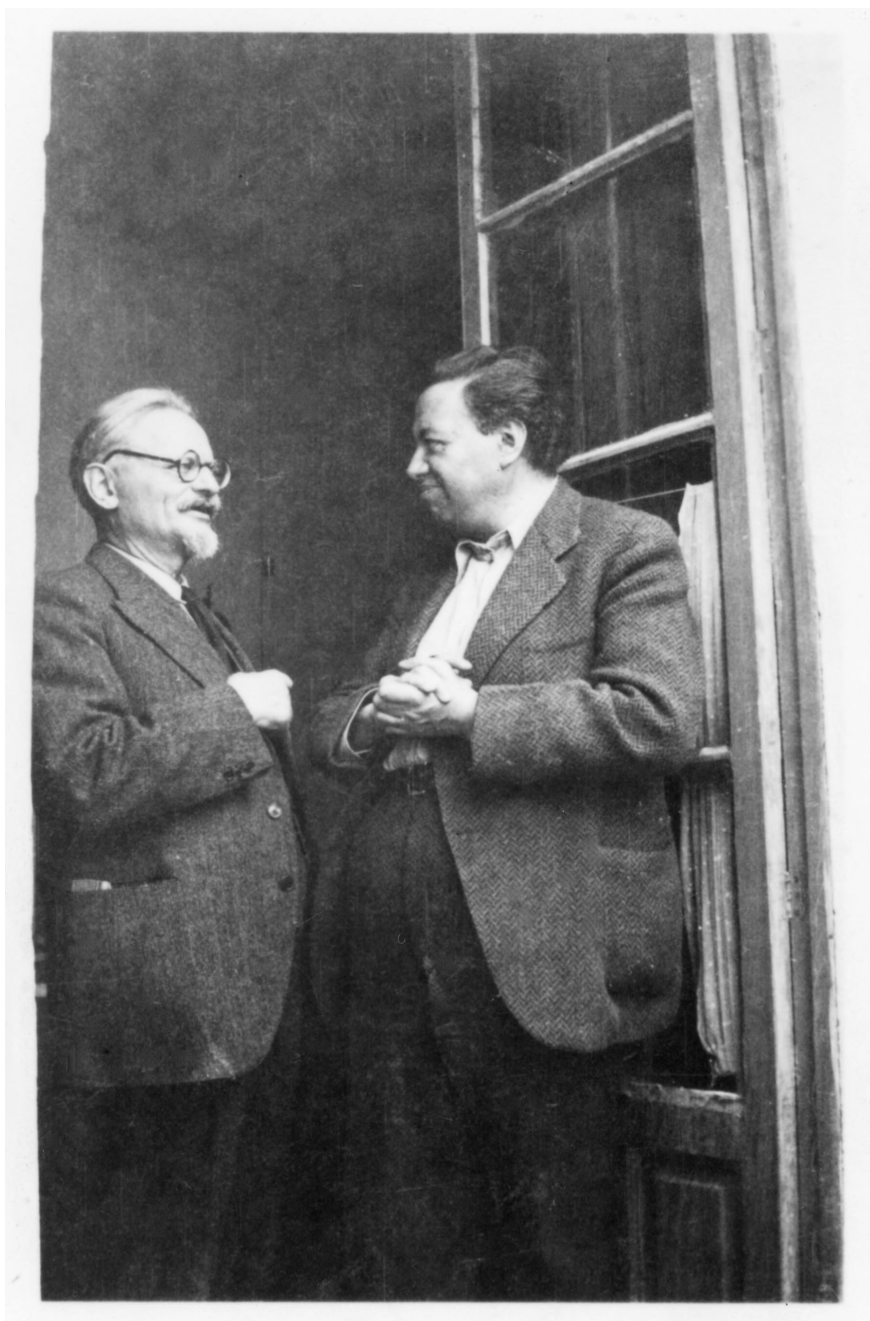


FIGURE 36 Leon Trotsky and Diego Rivera, Dewey Commission Hearings, Coyoacan, Mexico, April 1937

ALBERT GLOTZER, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 37 Natalia Sedova Trotsky and Albert Glotzer, Dewey Commission Hearings, Coyoacan, Mexico, April 1937

ALBERT GLOTZER, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 38 Frida Kahlo, Dewey Commission Hearings, Coyoacan, Mexico, April 1937
ALBERT GLOTZER, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 39 John McDonald, James T. Farrell, and Albert Glotzer, Dewey Commission Hearings, Coyoacan, Mexico, April 1937
ALBERT GLOTZER, IN POSSESSION OF THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 40 Socialist Workers Party, Political Committee Meeting, Clockwise from top left: Felix Morrow, James P. Cannon, Max Shachtman, George Clarke, James Burnham, Nathan Gould, Martin Abern

SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY, PIONEER PUBLISHERS, STEVE CLARK



FIGURE 41 Max Shachtman and James P. Cannon, Paris, at the time of the founding of the Fourth International, 1938

ALBERT GLOTZER, PROMETHEUS RESEARCH LIBRARY

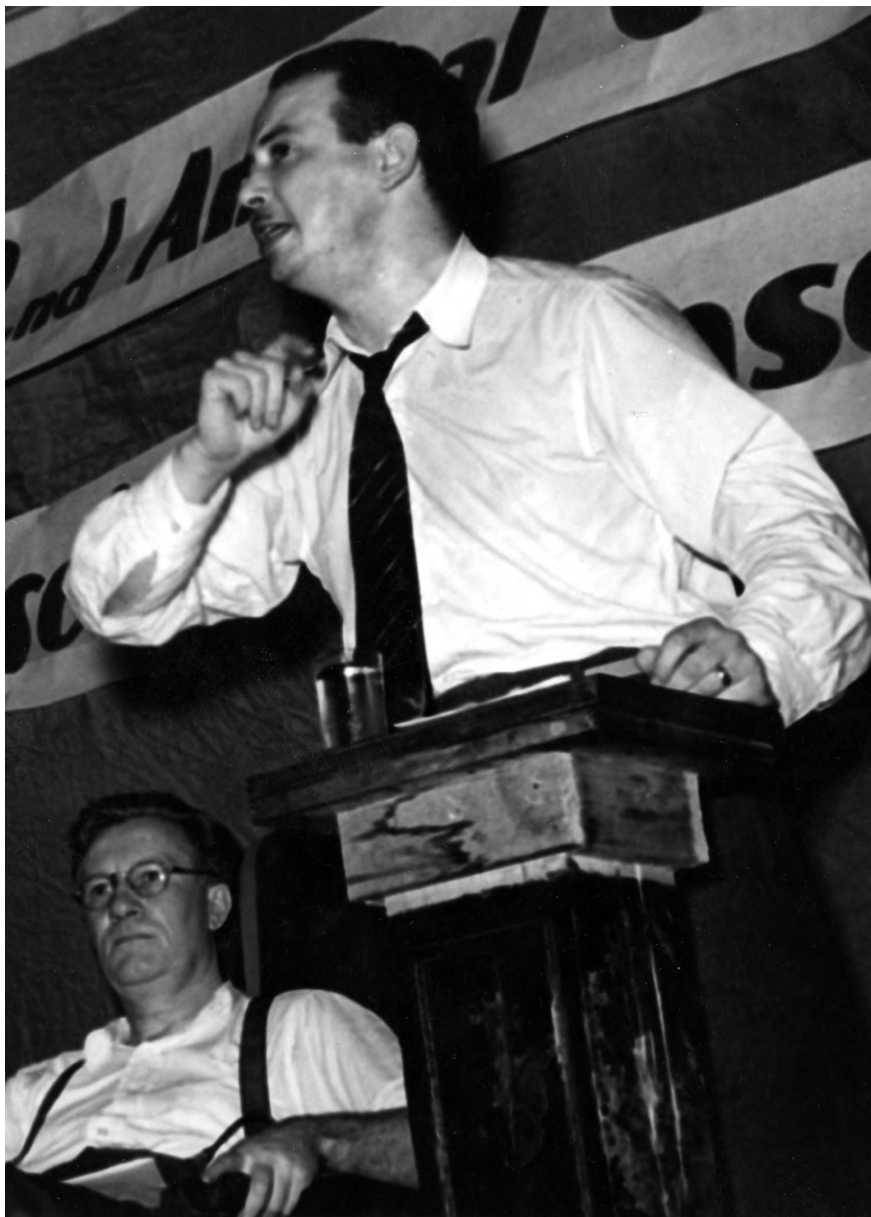


FIGURE 42 Max Shachtman and James P. Cannon, Socialist Workers Party Conference, 1939
MAX SHACHTMAN PAPERS, TAMIMENT LIBRARY, NP.087, BOX 1, FOLDER 7

CONCLUSION

Party/International

Cannon and his comrades, “gagged,” suspended, expelled, and facing constant attack, knew from at least the early summer of 1937 that their days in the Socialist Party were numbered. In a lengthy 29 June 1937 letter to comrades, Cannon insisted a split was inevitable, and that a reconstituted Socialist Party right-wing, supported by the Clarityites, was committed to driving the Left Wing from the Party. In response, Cannon called for a public fight against Norman Thomas and all of those who would attack or suppress this revolutionary contingent. It was time to fortify the militants and the youth who were gravitating to revolutionary politics.

Stressing that it would be fatal to cultivate illusions in the Socialist Party and the expectation that wavering centrist elements could be won to revolutionary resolve, Cannon called for an uncompromising struggle on the part of all left-wing comrades. Hesitation and vacillation would lead only to demoralization and defeat. Cannon thus proposed reestablishing the *Socialist Appeal*, conceding reluctantly that *Labor Action* had to be sacrificed in order to concentrate the Trotskyists’ limited resources. The need was for a “fighting political propaganda paper that puts all the issues just as flatly as do our internal caucus documents, only in much greater detail and much more aggressively and in a more savage tone.” A revived *Socialist Appeal*, according to Cannon, had to “begin preparing the radical workers now outside the party, and particularly the Stalinist workers, for the point of view we have on all fundamental and topical questions and for their recruitment into the movement we shall constitute under our own banner at the next stage of development.” Aware that such a violation of the SP’s publication ban on Trotskyist propaganda organs would result in the expulsion of the New York branch that published the paper, Cannon proposed that a campaign be launched refusing to recognize expulsions, agitating against the suppression of the Left Wing. West of the Mississippi, Cannon recognized that “native” socialists inclined to a revolutionary program were reluctant to engage with struggles they regarded as confined to New York. To offset this indifference, it was necessary to secure support for the *Appeal*. Cannon and Glen Trimble thus assured that upon its publication, West Coast branches in Fresno, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and the East Bay District would endorse the left-wing, Trotskyist paper as their official organ.

In the battle that would ensue, Cannon called on all comrades to remain in the Socialist Party, forcing their opponents to rely on bureaucratic measures to

drive revolutionaries out. Cannon speculated that this strategy could actually secure the allegiance of “the majority of the active membership of the Party.” To do so, however, the Trotskyists had to canvass widely, using their bases of support in New York, Chicago, Minneapolis, California, and Ohio to mount an agitational campaign that extended into Southern Illinois, Eastern Missouri, Massachusetts and Connecticut, Utah, Colorado, and Nebraska. Not only Cannon and Shachtman must go on tour, but a small army of others was to be set loose in an ambitious campaign of public meetings, “so that our lips are not sealed while decisive international events keep tumbling about our ears.”¹

This was an audacious and optimistic orientation, first discussed extensively in a June 1937 National Committee meeting of the Trotskyist Socialist Party Club.² There were differences among the leading cadre, but Cannon’s perspective, shared by Trotsky, largely prevailed. Shachtman later conceded that few in the entryist leadership had the stomach for an all-out factional fight against Trotsky and Cannon, which would have fractured the forces of United States Trotskyism.³ If Cannon’s plotting out of what would happen did not quite reach its projected mark, events over the course of the fall of 1937 largely followed the trajectory he predicted, especially with regard to the reaction of the Socialist Party officialdom. More and more branches in which the Trotskyists exercised an influence were turfed out of the Norman Thomas-led Party, prompting the establishment of a “National Committee of the Expelled Branches.” New York’s Jack Altman and Wisconsin’s Paul Porter intensified their ideological campaign against the reviled Trotskyists. Individuals given the heave-ho included former Workers’ Party leaders Burnham, Shachtman, Abern, Emanuel Geltman/Garrett, Felix Morrow, John G. Wright, Ernest Rice McKinney, and George Novack, as well as “native” Socialist Party left-wingers Hal Draper, Alex Retzkin, and Christian Neilson. It was testimony to Cannon’s secure revolutionary reputation on the West Coast, where he had worked most assiduously throughout the entry, that he was not given his walking papers from the Socialist Party. Norman Thomas reported in October 1937 that the Trotskyist leader had accosted the SP’s National Executive Committee with the riposte: “we got what we wanted

1 Cannon to Comrades, 29 June 1937, Box 4, Reel 4, James P. Cannon Papers, 1919–1975, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin [hereafter JPC Papers].

2 James P. Cannon, *The History of American Trotskyism: Report of a Participant* (New York: Pioneer, 1944), 250–251.

3 Max Shachtman, “The Reminiscences of Max Shachtman,” 295–298, 1963, Oral History Research Office, Number 488, Columbia University, New York, New York; Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 792.

out of joining the party for a while, our aims were accomplished, and now good-bye. We're going to take with us a lot of your folks."⁴

The fair-weather Clarityite "friends" of the Left Wing staked their willingness to offer Trotskyists even a sliver of democratic support on the demand that revolutionaries retreat and silence themselves. A revitalized *Socialist Appeal* refused this invitation to political quietude. Supplemented by extensive, widely-circulated private communications, the left-wing organ protested expulsions and continued to address the intensifying differentiation between Trotskyists and their increasingly vociferous opponents within the Socialist Party.

Trotskyists thus functioned, especially between October and December 1937, as a *de facto* External Opposition to the SP from which they had not yet been definitively banished. They pushed for more militancy in the Stalinist-led unemployed movement, and advocated class struggle unity among the forces of the American Federation of Labor [AFL] and the Congress of Industrial Organizations [CIO]. Continuing to lead the offensive against Stalinism, the now self-proclaimed Left Wing highlighted the role of the Comintern in derailing the Spanish Revolution. Cannon, Joe Carter, and others exposed Lovestoneite flip-flops. Shachtman, in particular, propagandized relentlessly against the war threat. Cochran and his comrades organized Active Workers Conferences in the name of the Socialist Party (Left Wing) in states like Ohio. And there were rank-and-file demands for a national referendum to address the imminent split in the Socialist Party.⁵ Recently returned from the mid-west, where he was addressing the fallout from the murder of Pat Corcoran, Cannon continued to draw out the widening lessons of the Moscow Trials, speaking at New York's

4 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 252; Norman Thomas to Devere Allen, Jack Altman, and Gus Tyler, 6 October 1937, quoted in Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985*, 792–793, which also outlines the clash between Trotskyists and the Socialist Party leadership in this period. For an account of Cannon's stature among socialists on the west coast, authoritative because it is offered by a Clarityite opponent, Travers Clement, see Clement to Jim and Rose, no date, 1937, Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers.

5 "Left Wing Socialist Calls for Militancy at Ohio W.A.A. Confab," *Socialist Appeal*, 6 November 1937; "CIO-AFL Meet Shows Prospects of Unity in Labor Movement," *Socialist Appeal*, 13 November 1937; "Shachtman Gives Marxist War Line at CCNY Despite C.P. Disruption Move," *Socialist Appeal*, 20 November 1937; Leon Trotsky, "It Is High Time to Launch a World Offensive Against Stalinism: An Open Letter to All Workers' Organizations," *Socialist Appeal*, 20 November 1937; B.C. Bennem, "An Open Letter to Norman Thomas," *Socialist Appeal*, 27 November 1937; "200 Hear Harry Milton Speak on Spain in San Francisco," *Socialist Appeal*, 27 November 1937; Joseph Carter, "Lovestoneites Change 'Line' Under Impact of Recent Events in the U.S.S.R.," *Socialist Appeal*, 11 November 1937; Blake Lear, "Midwest Conference Prepares T.U. Work of Party Convention," *Socialist Appeal*, 25 November 1937.

Webster Hall in mid-December 1937 on the meaning of Stalinism's frame-up offensive "From Moscow to Minneapolis."⁶

The culmination of this mobilization was an announced "rank-and-file" Emergency Convention of the Socialist Party's Left Wing, scheduled to convene at Chicago's Harrison Hotel on 31 December 1937. First discussed as early as September 1937, the Convention's call was driven by the increasingly bureaucratic methods of the Socialist Party in suppressing, disciplining, and expelling advocates of the Left Wing, be they individuals or entire branches.⁷ Its eventual timing was delayed somewhat because of other pressing issues. These included the Left Wing's involvement in various trade union matters, especially in maritime and auto, which Cannon considered critically important, ongoing Minneapolis developments, the necessity of consolidating the Left Wing in the Young People's Socialist League, and preparations relating to an International Conference that would found a Trotskyist Fourth International.⁸ Behind all of this was the conviction of Cannon and his supporters, pushed strongly by Trotsky, that it was time to rally American forces in a new Party that could unfurl the banner of revolutionary politics.

A mass meeting to welcome over 100 delegates to the dissident convention was called for 29 December 1937. The Wednesday night event was addressed by Cannon, described as the editor of the *Socialist Appeal*, National Secretary of the Socialist Party's Left Wing branches, and head of the Conventions Arrangement Committee. Shachtman, editor of the about-to-be-revived *New International*, Vincent Ray Dunne, leader of the Trotskyist-led Minneapolis teamsters, and Crary Trimble, Secretary of the California Socialist Party's Left Wing also spoke. The delegates heading to the Chicago convention were not overwhelming in numbers. They reflected the old strengths of the original Trotskyist nucleus that gravitated to Cannon in 1928–29; recruits to this original contingent secured through fusion with the Musteites; and a significant body of militants and youth won over to the Left Wing during the Socialist Party entry. Among them were two agricultural worker organizers from Fresno, California who made their way to Chicago by hitch-hiking and riding the rails, as well as a robust contingent of 15 from the Twin Cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul. The Ohio

6 "The Stalinist Frame-Ups: From Moscow to Minneapolis – Speaker James P. Cannon, Just Returned from Minneapolis," *Socialist Appeal*, 18 December 1937.

7 Glotzer to Cannon, 17 August 1937; 29 August 1937; 31 August 1937; Vincent Ray Dunne to Cannon, 24 August 1937; 26 August 1937, Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers.

8 Dunne to Cannon, 17 August 1937; Cannon to Dunne, 28 August 1937; Alan E. Silvius to Cannon, 8 September 1937; Cannon to Librairie du Travail, 10 September 1937; Glotzer to Cannon, 14 September 1937; Norman Mini to Cannon, 20 September 1937; Cannon to Dunne, 23 November 1937, Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers.

industrial-unemployed activist contingent was headed by Cochran, B.J. Widick, Art Preis, and Ted Selander. From Detroit came an auto militant, Jerry Lamont, while Ruben Plaskett, an African-American Appeal Institute member purged from the Textile Workers Organizing Committee represented the unemployed of Newark, New Jersey. He would later run for public office in Essex County, New Jersey, along with another black revolutionary and future member of the Socialist Workers Party [swp], Willis Crews.⁹

Al Goldman opened the Convention proceedings, where Shachtman delivered the first major report on the political perspectives of the revolutionary movement in the United States. Shachtman and Cannon worked closely on the broad Declaration of Principles, parts of which Shachtman noted had been “drawn up by Jim.” The most contentious issue within the Trotskyist forces proved to be “the Russian Question.” Trotsky, Cannon, and Shachtman remained committed to the view that the Soviet Union was a workers’ state. They recognized that the Soviet Union was degenerating under a Stalinist leadership that left the revolutionary masses no option but a political revolution that would reestablish a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat, paving the way for “the reform of the economy and the reassertion of unambiguous progress toward socialism.” The foundation of their orientation to the Soviet Union was that Stalinism was eroding the revolutionary project and would, if not defeated by the working class, eventually lead to the restoration of capitalism and the defeat of socialism. Nonetheless, nationalized property forms and what this economic base provided in terms of the possibilities of workers’ rule and the construction of socialism remained, and it would be folly to abandon the communist experiment to capitalist aggression and assault. With imperialist war threatening, the Soviet Union required of all revolutionaries an “unconditional defense.”

James Burnham and Joseph Carter disagreed, at least on one pivotal issue. They tried, in November 1937, to amend the draft resolution of principles by stressing that the Stalinist bureaucracy was now “**a reactionary force**” that was destroying “the planned and nationalized economy” to the point that the Soviet Union could no longer be considered a workers’ state. If the Stalinist state had not yet established bourgeois rule, the duo contended in one discussion bulletin, it had destroyed the proletarian substance of the revolution. Burnham

9 “Kansas City Local Endorses Chicago Rank and File Convention,” *Socialist Appeal*, 4 December 1937; “Convention Date Near: Locals Elect Delegates,” *Socialist Appeal*, 18 December 1937; “On to the Convention! Chicago Mass Meeting To Welcome Delegates,” *Socialist Appeal*, 25 December 1937; “Convention Sidelights,” *Socialist Appeal*, 8 January 1938; “Elections Prove Need for Independent Labor Action: Make Good Showings,” *Socialist Appeal*, 19 November 1938.

and Carter continued to support the defense of the Soviet Union against a military attack on the part of capitalist nations, but they struck a dissident blow against seeing the USSR as a workers' state. In a later statement, Burnham went even further, crossing interpretive swords with Trotsky in a defiant analytic attack that insisted, "If I were forced to choose between the single alternative, bourgeois or proletarian, I should unhesitatingly call the Soviet State bourgeois." For his part, Shachtman, at this conjuncture, considered the stance of Burnham and Carter "deplorable," an incitement to "the growing prejudices and reactions to Bolshevism" which "pervade our ranks" and that could only nurture "the worst" elements and "their creeds." Shachtman and Cannon contained this challenge, receiving Trotsky's unqualified blessings, but the contentious debate over the nature of the Soviet Union that unraveled in Trotskyist circles in November – December 1937 was a harbinger of things to come.¹⁰

Less volatile, apparently, was the draft resolution's stand against imperialist war:

If the working class is unable to prevent the outbreak of war, and the United States enters directly into it, our party stands pledged to the traditional position of revolutionary Marxism. It will utilize the crisis of capitalist rule engendered by the war, to prosecute the class struggle with the

10 Relevant statements include "Draft Resolution of the Convention Arrangements Committee," "Amendment to Draft Resolution – Burnham and Carter," "Once Again: The USSR and its Defense – Leon Trotsky," *Internal Bulletin: Organizing Committee for the Socialist Party Convention*, 2 (November 1937), 1–23; "The Class Nature of the Stalinist State – J. Carter," "Formula to Reality – J. Burnham," *Internal Bulletin: Organizing Committee of the Socialist Party Convention*, 5 (December 1937), 3–25; Shachtman to Cannon, 2 December 1937, Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers.; Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 254–255; Shachtman, "Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Russia," *New Internationalist*, 4 (January 1938), 8–13; Trotsky to Cannon, 4 February 1938, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1937–1938]* (New York: Pathfinder, 1976), 161. The November – December 1937 debate over the nature of the Soviet Union led to an exodus of approximately a dozen Trotskyists before the Emergency Convention, among them Harry Roskolenko, Max Geltman, the artist Attilio Salemmme, and Max Eastman's son Dan. See Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialist's Odyssey Through the "American Century"* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), 90; Constance Ashton Myers, *The Prophet's Army: Trotskyists in America, 1928–1941* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 144; Harry Roskolenko, *When I Was Last on Cherry Street* (New York: Stein and Day, 1965), 176–183. Pre- and post-convention allegations of Cannon and Shachtman violating democratic procedures in securing adherence to their views were voiced, and answered by Trotsky. See Leon Trotsky, "A Few Words About the Party Regime," *Internal Bulletin: Organizing Committee of the Socialist Party Convention*, 5 (December 1937), 26–27; Melos Most to Cannon and Shachtman, 5 January 1938, Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers.

utmost intransigence, to strengthen the independent labor and revolutionary movement, and to bring the war to a close by revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of proletarian rule in the form of the workers' state. Combatting the chauvinistic wave, it will not only reject any and every form of class collaboration, support of the war and of the capitalist government, but will work toward the defeat of the American capitalist class and its war regime by proletarian revolution. Even if the United States were to be allied with the Soviet Union in a war against another imperialist power, this circumstance would not for a minute alter the imperialist aims and character of the war so far as the United States is concerned; neither therefore would there be any alteration in the position of our party with regard to American capitalism and its government and in our irreconcilable hostility towards them. The practical steps which our party would take in the course of its opposition to war would, however, have to be decided in consideration of the need of facilitating the utmost material aid to the Soviet Union's armed forces in their war against an imperialist power, in conformity with our position of defense of the Soviet Union from imperialist assault.

Equally non-contentious was the trade union resolution, introduced by Cannon. It heralded the explosive growth of the labor movement, registering in the advances of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, which galvanized the masses of unskilled and semi-skilled workers in key, and previously unorganized, industries. Identifying the American Federation of Labor's reactionary leadership, and calling out its ruthless attempts to stem the tide of CIO militancy, even to the point of strike-breaking, the Convention's trade union resolution nonetheless favored "the earliest and completest possible unification of the A.F.L. and the C.I.O." Lauding the sit-down strike and calling for "Workers' Control of Production," Cannon's presentation of the trade union resolution struck a militant cord of labor solidarity and struggle. He later reflected that, "The great surprise of the convention was the revelation that while we had been concentrating on this inner political work inside the Socialist Party, we had been at the same time developing, particularly without any direction from our central leadership, our trade union work on a scale we had never approached before ...".¹¹

11 For accounts of the Emergency Convention's resolutions see "New Party Formed; to Fight War Plans: Convention Resolutions Stress Fight on War, Mass Work, Defense of Soviet Union by New Party," *Socialist Appeal*, 8 January 1938; "Party Convention Analyzes Political Situation: Text of Resolution Adopted at Chicago by Founding Convention of the S.W.P.,"

The crowning achievement of the Emergency Convention of the Socialist Party's beleaguered Left Wing was the founding of the Socialist Workers Party on 1 January 1938. New Jersey delegate George Breitman later recalled the exhilaration of those in attendance, who shared the conviction of participating in an historic event: "a milestone in the history of the American revolutionary movement ... the launching – at last – of the party that would lead the American workers in their coming socialist revolution."¹² High were the hopes of the founders of the SWP, who invested much in the promise of the new organization:

Its ranks still small, its strength still inadequate for the mission, the Socialist Workers Party nevertheless faces the future with supreme confidence in the final victory. Conscious of the great difficulties, it is also aware of the great prospects. The American working class is the most militant and combative in the entire world. Its basic weakness lies only in its lack of class consciousness and revolutionary perspective. The party of Marxist internationalism will seek to imbue the toilers of the United States with this consciousness and this perspective. That accomplished, no power in the world can prevent the victory of the proletariat and the transform-

Socialist Appeal, 22 January 1938. See also *Declaration of Principles and Constitution of the Socialist Workers Party* (New York: Pioneer, 1938). Cannon's comment on trade union work is in *History of American Trotskyism*, 252. See also George Breitman, ed., *The Founding of the Socialist Workers Party: Minutes and Resolutions, 1938–1939* (New York: Pathfinder, 1982), 27; and for a supplement to the discussion of Cannon's maritime work on the west coast, outlined in the preceding chapter, see Tom Kerry, *Workers, Bosses, and Bureaucrats: A Socialist View of Labor Struggles in the 1930s* (New York: Pathfinder, 1980). In the aftermath of the founding Convention of the SWP, a key programmatic impasse would temporarily emerge around the question of the labor party. At a National Committee Plenum in April 1938, Cannon's motion on an "action program" (the Transitional Program) and the labor party resulted in a stalemate with almost half of the committee voting in favor of separate motions by Shachtman and Burnham. As Cannon subsequently wrote to Trotsky (on 21 May 1938) the issues involved in this conflict were obscure and a subcommittee of the SWP Political Committee met and resolved matters so that the new Party could shift its position to advocating the creation of a labor party, something Cannon had been promoting cautiously for some time. See Joseph Hansen, "James P. Cannon The Internationalist," *Education for Socialists* (New York: Socialist Workers Party, July 1980), in documents prepared for publication by George Breitman, "The Founding of the International (1938)," 23–24.

- 12 Breitman quoted in Paul Le Blanc, "Trotskyism in the United States – The First Fifty Years," in George Breitman, Paul Le Blanc, and Alan Wald, eds, *Trotskyism in the United States: Historical Essays and Reconsiderations* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), 23.

ation of society on a rational basis, without classes, without oppression, without exploitation and misery and war.¹³

The 31 December–1 January convention that founded the SWP considered “an indispensable condition of the extension of the revolution” as building “the new party of Marxian internationalism.” It concluded that, “The task of the defense of the Soviet Union, the revolutionary struggle for workers’ power and for socialism throughout the world, are summed up in the building of the Fourth International, and its sections throughout the world.”¹⁴ In early January 1938, however, the founding convention of the Fourth International was months away. Cannon and the new American Socialist Workers Party would play a prominent role in its birth.

The first public event of the newly-formed SWP featured Cannon, National Secretary of the Party, speaking at an Irving Plaza Lenin Memorial meeting on 23 January 1938. As the *Socialist Appeal* headlined the disintegration of the Popular Front government in France and outlined the ongoing struggles of West Coast maritime workers against Harry Bridges and a Communist Party-orchestrated CIO National Maritime Union, Cannon’s talk exposed how revolutionary Leninism was being stifled by Stalinism.¹⁵ Other threats also loomed large. The SWP was thrown immediately into the impending war crisis, issuing its manifesto, “Down with the War Mongers!” in mid-February 1938. As the SWP’s National Committee Plenum prepared to convene in New York, 15–18 April 1938, Cannon joined Shachtman, Dobbs, Goldman, Widick, and Lois Orr, recently returned from Spain, as a speaker at a mass rally protesting the bellicose response of British and American imperialism to the nationalization of foreign-owned oil fields in Mexico.¹⁶

13 “Hail the Socialist Workers Party!” *Socialist Appeal*, 15 January 1938.

14 “Convention Resolutions Stress Fight on War, Mass Work, Defense of Soviet Union by New Party,” *Socialist Appeal*, 8 January 1938.

15 “All Out at Lenin Memorial Meeting Sunday: Cannon to Speak on Great Leader’s Teaching,” “W. Coast Unions Score Victories Over Stalinists,” “New French Crisis Stirred by Break in the Popular Front: Sharper Clashes Loom in Class War as Workers’ Burdens Increase,” “Leninism Can’t Be Embalmed,” all in *Socialist Appeal*, 22 January 1938.

16 “Down with the War Mongers! Socialist Workers Party Manifesto,” *Socialist Appeal*, 19 February 1938; “National Committee Plenum Meeting in NY Next Week,” *Socialist Appeal*, 9 April 1938. Lois Orr, a precocious, recently-married 19-year-old when she and her husband, Charles Orr, sidetracked their honeymoon to go to Barcelona and witness the Spanish Civil War, ended up working for the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista, or POUM, although she was certainly critical of its political shortcomings. See Lois Orr, *Letters from Barcelona: An American Woman in Revolution and Civil War* (London: Palgrave,

These challenges did not deter the Trotskyists. They continued to pursue the kinds of mass work that they had championed inside the Socialist Party, including labor defense campaigns, concentrated in the Non-Partisan Committee for the Defense of Fred Beal. A leader of the Gastonia textile strike of 1929, Beal had been sentenced to a 20-year prison term in North Carolina for a murder that many considered a frame-up. Formerly a member of the Communist Party, Beal traveled to Russia and returned a critic of the Stalinist regime. His defense, taken up by the Communist Party and its mass organizations, was terminated by the Stalinists, leaving Trotskyists as Beal's most vocal advocates.¹⁷

The SWP also continued to defend Trotsky and his followers from continuing Soviet attack. When Trotsky's son Leon Sedoff died under suspicious circumstances in a Paris hospital, and a new round of Moscow frame-up trials (which Trotsky regarded as "Stalin's dramatized answer to the verdict of the inquiry commission headed by John Dewey") left Lenin's last cohort of comrades facing execution, the SWP detailed the extent of Stalinism's political cleansing of the Bolshevik old guard. A mass meeting of 800 at Manhattan Plaza protested the new wave of frame-ups, 100 SWPers picketed the New York Soviet consulate, and a 12 March 1938 *Socialist Appeal* was devoted to a "Moscow Trial Special Supplement."¹⁸

Shachtman tended to mount the speakers' podiums on these issues, with Cannon preoccupied, in his National Secretary's position, with the inner-decision making of the new Party. He clearly missed the West Coast and San Francisco's fogs, asking in one private correspondence if they were as "thick and beautiful as ever?" He kept his hand in developments concerning Califor-

2009); Jeremy Harding, "Paralyzed by the Absence of Danger," *London Review of Books*, 24 September 2009.

17 "Workers Must Rally Round Beal to Fight Sabotage of His Defense," *Socialist Appeal*, 19 February 1938. On Beal see Fred Beal, *Proletarian Journey: New England, Gastonia, Moscow* (New York: Hillman-Curl, 1937); John A. Salmond, *Gastonia, 1929: The Story of the Lory Mill Strike* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

18 "Leon Sedoff Dies in Paris After Sudden Operation," *Socialist Appeal*, 26 February 1938; "Stalin Stages New Frame-Up: Last Surviving Old Bolsheviks Facing Death," *Socialist Appeal*, 5 March 1938; "Stalin Regime Desperate: New Moscow Trial Shows Usual Flaws," *Socialist Appeal*, 12 March 1938; "New York Consulate Picketed to Protest Trial" & "Shachtman Talks on Trials to 800," *Socialist Appeal*, 12 March 1938; "Moscow Trail Special Supplement," *Socialist Appeal*, 12 March 1938; "Lenin's Aides Shot: GPU Court Decrees Death for Eighteen After Farical Trial," *Socialist Appeal*, 19 March 1938; and for Trotsky's commentary on the 1938 frame-up trials see the writings in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1937-1938]*, 186-205, 214-240, 262-264. On Sedoff's death see as well George Clarke to Cannon, 21 March 1938, Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers; and the selection of writings and commentary that appears in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1937-1938]*, 163-181.

nian SWP branches, and was especially involved in trying to maintain Trotskyist influence in the maritime sector, although it was an uphill battle. He laid out for activists among sailors and port workers the necessity of building vibrant opposition groupings within the National Maritime Union. Cannon strongly advised his west coast comrades to avoid any organizational fetishism in their complicated struggles with Harry Bridges and the Stalinists, which necessarily involved AFL-CIO antagonisms. He feared the inclination of an I.W.W.-like exaggeration of the importance of independence. Cannon also advised the Sailors Union of the Pacific, which was routinely involved in clashes with the Communist Party-aligned Bridges, not to give any support to the state's campaign to deport the longshore leader. Cannon wrote in mid-February 1938: "I have noticed many times that militant workers carry their justified hatred against the C.P. fakers to the point of making indiscriminate and unprincipled combinations against them." A recent attempt by an anti-Bridges minority in the San Pedro local of the International Longshoremen's Association [ILA] to take control of the hiring hall through court action illustrated just this kind of mistake, which also rebounded to the credit of the Communist Party. Gratified that the SUP took a clear and correct stand in repudiating the actions of the San Pedro waterfront workers, Cannon urged Lundeberg's union to pass a resolution on the state's attacks on Bridges, stating its "uncompromising opposition to any attempt to deport union leaders regardless of differences of opinion with them." Cannon also engaged in firm, but futile, correspondence with the editor of the *New Republic*, which alleged that Trotskyists were providing affidavits used by the state in its campaign against Bridges.¹⁹

Dissident Socialist Party branches, tired of endless recriminations and futile correspondence with Thomas and other Party leaders, opted to join the now established Socialist Workers Party.²⁰ This consolidation of American Trotsky-

19 Cannon to Dear Norma, 15 February 1938; Cannon, "Open Letter to the Editor of the *New Republic*," 22 February 1938; Bruce Bliven (Editor, *New Republic*) to Cannon, 24 February 1938; Cannon to Bliven, 9 March 1938; Cannon to Bill Gannon, 9 March 1938; Cannon to Trimble and Kerry, 9 March 1938; 6 May 1938; Cannon to Ray Sparrow, 9 March 1938; Kerry to Frank, 4 May 1938; Cannon to Kerry, 21 May 1938, all in Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers. Trotsky also weighed in on the role of both the *Nation* and the *New Republic*, although he was not concerned with the Bridges deportation, concentrating his attack on these magazine's liberal support of Moscow. See Trotsky, "The Priests of Half Truth," 19 March 1938 in *Writings of Leon Trotsky* [1937-1938], 277-282. Cannon's recognition that it was improper for workers to use the courts to try to take control of a union hiring hall should be counter-posed to his endorsement of using the courts to secure a judgement against the Communist Party's *Daily Worker*, discussed in the last chapter.

20 "Minnesota Socialists Reject Party of Norman Thomas, Join the S.W.P.," *Socialist Appeal*, 16 July 1938.

ism, with the SWP on a secure footing by early 1938, allowed Cannon to devote his political energies to the formal establishment of the Fourth International. Trotsky's forces in Europe were weak and divided, by no means united on fundamental questions. Yet Trotsky was insistent, with war looming, capitalism in crisis, fascism in power in Germany, gaining ground and threatening to secure new victories in Spain, and the world's first workers' state threatened by Stalinism, that a new International must be formed. Cannon, buoyed by the successful launching of the Socialist Workers Party, agreed.

The United States section of this Fourth International stood head-and-shoulders above the small European Trotskyist formations (both in terms of the support it commanded and its accomplishments), whose numbers could sometimes be counted only in the dozens. At the founding of the SWP, conventional wisdom has pegged membership at roughly 1,000, but 1938 data compiled by George Breitman indicate that a figure of just over 1500 would be more accurate. Trotsky himself looked to the SWP to lead, asking if its "Declaration of Principles" could be used for the International Conference, where the founding of the Fourth International was anticipated to happen. He regarded the American section as having solidified agreement on important issues, among them positions on trade unions, war, sectarianism, and defense of the Soviet Union. In writing the transitional draft program that would serve as the guiding document for a new Fourth International, Trotsky relied on the experience of his American comrades, drawing on the lessons of the 1934 teamsters' strikes, the experience of fusion and entry experiments of the mid-to-late 1930s, and the founding documents of the SWP. Cannon later claimed that, "Trotsky leaned so heavily on the Americans, and was so anxious to strengthen their authority in the International, that when he drew up the Transitional Program ... he wrote it *first for the SWP*. He asked us to adopt it *first*, and then to sponsor it at" the founding conference of the Fourth International.²¹

21 Alan Wald cites Breitman's figures in "The End of 'American Trotskyism'? Problems in History and Theory," in Breitman, Le Blanc, and Wald, eds., *Trotskyism in the United States*, 281; Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 97; Myers, *Prophet's Army*, 146–149; Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929–1940* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 419–421. For Trotsky's reliance on and indebtedness to the SWP see *Writings of Leon Trotsky* [1937–1938], esp. 283, 317, 343–344; and the dialogue/exchange between SWP members and Trotsky in Mexico in May – June 1938, which are republished in "Discussions with Leon Trotsky on the Transitional Program," *Education for Socialists* (New York: SWP, March 1969). Quote from James P. Cannon, "Internationalism and the SWP," in Cannon, *Speeches to the Party: The Revolutionary Perspective and the Revolutionary Party* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 69–70. An invaluable reproduction of Trotsky's *Transitional Program*, which contains extensive contextualization of many relevant issues such as trade union policy, is

In New York, over late January and early February 1938, the SWP leadership discussed the International Conference, which it was thought might occur early in the summer of 1938, an anticipated date that proved impossible to meet. Cannon reported to Vincent Ray Dunne, Carl Skoglund, Farrell Dobbs, and Felix Morrow that with reports indicating “the European organization of our International is not in such good shape,” it was no longer possible to “post-pone our long neglected responsibility ... to assist in the international work.” It appeared that the SWP would have to delegate someone to work in Europe immediately, and there were proposals to send one or more of Cannon, Shachtman, Burnham, or Dunne, as well, perhaps, as some younger comrades fluent in French. Cannon wondered if he was the right choice to go alone, acknowledging his lack of facility with European languages. But it was understood that “he would be on the delegation and perhaps remain there after the Conference.”²²

Cannon, Shachtman, Dunne, and Karsner eventually traveled to Mexico to confer with Trotsky about the International Conference. They went by car, and met with Trotsky in six Coyoacan discussion sessions between 20 and 25 March 1938. It was clear from the Mexican exchanges that Trotsky held Cannon in high esteem, and the American movement occupied a place of prominence within international Trotskyism. Its emissaries were honored with “a rousing meeting of about 1,000 workers called by the unions,” and their trip to see Trotsky was a great success, marred only by an automobile accident that was apparently minor. Returning to the United States via Kansas City, Rose and Jim reconnected briefly with some of the Cannon family, including his brother Phil and sister Agnes.

Cannon recognized that the SWP, the largest and healthiest Trotskyist party in the world, had a heavy obligation. “[N]one of us are Internationalists in the real sense of the word,” he wrote in February 1938, “we only think we are. In our hearts we tend to think of a stay in Europe as a period of absence from work in the ‘movement’, meaning our own back yard.” His next months would constitute an attempt to rectify this revolutionary deficiency. From its founding, the SWP contributed a monthly pledge to the International Secretariat and, in May 1938, it tithed all branches to fund the International Conference, paying, as well, for the secondment of Charles Curtiss to Mexico on behalf of the Pan-American

The Transitional Program: The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International (London: International Bolshevik Tendency, 1998).

22 Cannon to Dunne, Skoglund, Dobbs, and Morrow, 10 February 1938, Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers.

Pre-Conference, where the Los Angeles comrade was tasked with reconstitution of the defunct Trotskyist forces.²³

As he wrestled with his internationalist obligations, Cannon put his personal desire to return to San Francisco and lend his weight to the struggles in the maritime unions aside. Trotsky leaned on Cannon to turn to Europe, rather than invest his time in California. Correspondence with Coyoacan soon scotched the possibility of Cannon resuming his agitation among waterfront workers. "I do not doubt that the situation on the Coast is critical and important," wrote Trotsky, "but it is, nevertheless, only a local situation, which tomorrow will be repeated in other parts of the States. The question in Europe has a universal character: it is possibly the last meeting before the war; the conference will also give the American section reinforced authority for its action in California as elsewhere." Trotsky concluded that others, such as Dobbs or Widick, might be dispatched to San Francisco, but that Cannon take up assignment across the Atlantic "as quickly as possible." Another letter followed on the heels of this communication. Trotsky thought the factional situation confronting the incipient Fourth International inflamed by the head of Belgium's Parti Socialiste Révolutionnaire, the controversial Georges Veereken. He implored Cannon to make his way to Europe "at any price," stating categorically that his absence "will facilitate the work of the disrupters and in the last analysis create a difficult situation for the American party." Nine days later Cannon wrote to Tom Kerry that his "projected visit to the coast is now definitively excluded." Cannon acknowledged the importance of the work among maritime workers, and indicated how much he had "personally looked forward with great eagerness to the prospect of participating in your fight." Yet "the prior claim of our International Movement, which in the long run dominates our national work," had to be given precedence over the west coast situation.²⁴

Cannon struggled to secure resources to finance an SWP contingent to the International Conference, now postponed until early September 1938, but he ran into the brick wall of the Party's insolvency. Despondent at the delay, Cannon wrote to Dunne in mid-June 1938: "We are still held up here for lack of

23 The above paragraphs draw on Cannon to Dunne, Skoglund, Dobbs, and Morrow, 10 February 1938; Cannon to Curtiss, 25 May 1938; Cannon to Mary Eden, 31 March 1938; Cannon to Lillian Reynolds, 31 March 1938, Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers; "Discussions with Trotsky – 1 International Conference," 20 March 1938, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1937–1938]*, 293, and on the SWP and the Mexican section, 314.

24 *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1937–1938]*, 326, 328, 336–342, 362–363; Cannon to Kerry, 21 May 1938, Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers. On the volatile situation in maritime see, for instance, "Stalinist Union Wreckers Hit Hard by NMU Elections; 20,000 L.A. Workers Quit Bridges C.I.O. Council," *Socialist Appeal*, 15 August 1938.

funds to make the ambitious journey so long ago projected. In general the financial situation is very bad. I have a strong feeling that we must get the Congress out of the road before we can hope to really get the party working on all cylinders. The delay is creating some demoralization all the way around." Unable to proceed to Europe, Cannon occupied himself with advocating workers' self-defense in the aftermath of a capitalist offensive against strikes. He was particularly incensed at the reactionary attacks on the CIO in Jersey City, New Jersey, where Mayor Hague unleashed an "Everything for Business!" campaign that saw "pug uglies" turn the streets into bloody battlegrounds between unarmed workers and blackjack and baton-wielding thugs. Dismayed that the CIO backed away from the fight, turning it over to liberal-Stalinist civil liberties bodies, Cannon called for the formation of Workers' Defense Guards, "surrounded by the sympathy and support of the workers' mass organizations," to defeat Hagueism, which both Trotsky and Cannon saw as incipient fascism. Along with George Novack and Lyman Paine, Cannon helped launch an "American Fund for Political Prisoners." He also advised comrades involved with the mercurial Homer Martin in the United Automobile Workers, and tried to broaden the base of the SWP, including appealing to members of the Communist Party to recover their revolutionary heritage. Positive steps were taken on this latter front, with the SWP and the CP marching together in a united front, anti-Nazi protest in San Francisco at the end of May 1938. Overtaken by the rapid development of the broad opposition to a convention of the German-American Bund being held in California, the Stalinists joined the movement after the Trotskyists and participated in a unanimous vote that secured Glen Trimble, state Secretary of the SWP, a place on the mobilization's five-person steering committee. All of this happened at the same time that the Browder leadership of the Communist Party was attempting to bar its members constitutionally from having "personal or political relationships with Trotskyists, Lovestoneites, or other 'known enemies of the party and the working class.'"²⁵ After the successful anti-

25 Cannon to Dunne, 15 June 1938; Cannon to Clarke, 25 June 1938, in Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers; "An Open Letter to Members of the Communist Party," and "The Memorial Day Massacre: If the Martyrs Could Speak: For Workers Defense!" *Socialist Appeal*, 28 May 1938; "Untouchables," *Socialist Appeal*, 21 May 1938; "Coast SWPers and Stalinists in Anti-Nazi Demonstration," and B.J. Widick, "The Lessons of Akron: Organize Workers' Defense!" *Socialist Appeal*, 4 June 1938; "NY Committee Launches Fund to Assist Persecuted Revolutionists," *Socialist Appeal*, 18 June 1938; James P. Cannon, "An Urgent Appeal: Aid the Revolutionists!" and "Refugee Fund is Welcomed Far and Wide," *Socialist Appeal*, 25 June 1938; James P. Cannon, "Jersey City: Lesson and Warning," *Socialist Appeal*, 9 July 1938; "Labor Under Attack: The Only Answer," *Socialist Appeal*, 30 July 1938; Trotsky, "Discussion with Crux [Trotsky] on the Transitional Program, June 1938," *Education for Socialists* (New York: SWP, March 1969),

Nazi demonstration, which rallied 2,000–3,000, the Stalinists returned to form, convening a city-wide conference to continue the anti-fascist momentum only to exclude all other working-class parties. When this met with opposition, the CP withdrew from the proceedings it had initiated. On the international front, Cannon attended to the problems of getting Charles Curtiss to Mexico, where Trotsky was adamant that important work needed to be carried out and the American section had a pivotal role to play.²⁶

When Cannon's friend and leader of the Minneapolis truck drivers, Bill Brown, was killed in late May 1938, Cannon made the trek to the mid-west to attend the funeral, later providing a warm eulogy in the *Socialist Appeal*.²⁷ By the time that Cannon's tribute to Brown appeared, plans were cohering for his trip to Europe. Instructions from the International Secretariat made it clear that the forces rallying under the proposed banner of the Fourth International were fractured and factionalized, and in Mexico during his March meetings with Trotsky, Cannon made his positions eminently clear. Contrary to the view that the formation of a new International was premature, or that specific groups had insufficient time to cohere, Cannon wanted decisive action:

We think that the main elements of the Fourth International are by now crystallized. We should put an end to our negotiations and maneuvers with the centrists and henceforth deal with them as separate and alien groupings. ... The thing that does not satisfy us about the European groups is that they never seem to finish a question – they never bring their struggle to a conclusion. Half of the success we have had in the U.S. is due to the fact that we come to a point with people who cannot be assimilated. We discuss with them so far only; when they break from the organization all relations end. ... With people such as Vereecken we have followed the policy of coming to a definitive conclusion after thorough discussion. We cannot build the Fourth International with permanent discussion mongers. I think the conference has to lay down its political line and say to all: Here is our program and platform. Let those who are with us come along

esp. 14, 17. It was in this context that Local 544 would form the Union Defense Guard. See "Union Defense Guards Formed by Local 544: Group Prepares to Defend Union Hall From Thugs," *Socialist Appeal*, 17 September 1938; Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2013), 227–228.

26 "Stalinists Oust Selves from Anti-Nazi Drive," *Socialist Appeal*, 18 June 1938; Cannon to Curtiss, 21 June 1938, Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers; *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1937–1938]*, 326, 328.

27 "Organizer Kills Brown in Insane Fit," and Carlos Hudson, "Minneapolis Labor Pays Final Tribute to Brown," *Socialist Appeal*, 4 June 1938; James P. Cannon, "Bill Brown: A Proletarian Fighter," *Socialist Appeal*, 2 July 1938.

on this basis. Let others go their own way. ... the Fourth International is formed as a definite organization to which every member must be loyal. Those who lightly make splits must be chopped off and cast aside.

Trotsky, who had cause in the past to caution against Cannon's organizational impatience, urging that political discussions be allowed to run their course, was in this instance entirely in agreement with his American comrade. "I subscribe to every word said by Comrade Cannon," Trotsky interjected, indicating that whatever the roadblocks on the path to the new international, they were to be cleared as quickly and as expeditiously as possible.²⁸

One of these barriers was Great Britain. The small Trotskyist forces were stymied by their balkanization and different approaches to the Labour Party and the Independent Labour Party [ILP], which had a longer tradition and more left-wing politics than its larger counterpart. The relations of the fractured followers of Trotsky in England and Scotland were almost incomprehensively complicated.

A British Group of the Left Opposition of the Communist International (later known as the Communist League) began publishing *Red Flag* in 1933. It was originally encouraged to enter the ILP, but the move proved divisive, splitting the group and generating more controversy than political gain. As a contingent of the Communist League remained outside of the ILP, a Marxist Group consolidated inside. It controlled a few London branches, and among its members were luminaries such as C.L.R. James and a group of South African militants led by Ted Grant. By the mid-1930s, a series of complications, including the threat of war, the activities of Stalinist entrists in the ILP,²⁹ and the rising importance of the Labour Party, complicated matters for the Marxist Group, whose fortunes were falling. Its rival, the Communist League/Marxist League, oriented toward the Labour Party, and worked closely with the Socialist League [SL], where Reg Groves battled against attempts on the part of the laborist officialdom to make membership in the SL incompatible with membership in the Labour Party. Groves actually made headway in electoral contests, but never managed to gain a seat as he battled prejudice and the predictable attacks of Stalinists. Further complicating matters, a clandestine Bolshevik-Leninist Group entered the Labour Party in 1936, and Jock Haston, disgruntled

28 "Discussions with Trotsky: I – International Conference, 20 March 1938," in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1937–1938]*, 285, 288–289.

29 For a substantial discussion of Stalinist entrism in this period see Alan Campbell and John McIlroy, "'The Trojan Horse': Communist Entrism and the British Labor Party, 1933–43," *Labor History*, 59 (2018), 513–554.

with the Communist Party's German policies, formed a small Hyde Park group that promoted Trotskyist views through the selling of Pioneer Press pamphlets.

One of the outcomes of this fractured political scene was that at a preliminary 1936 Paris gathering of those seemingly dedicated to the creation of a Fourth International four delegates attended from Britain, representing at least two different organizations. At competing October 1936 Trotskyist conferences in London, three different groups contended, C.L.R. James's Marxist Group calling for the fusion of the divided ranks and advocating work in both the Labour Party and the ILP. The Bolshevik-Leninist Group in the Labour Party, headed by Denzil Harber and Ken Alexander, and Groves's Marxist League were not necessarily opposed to fusion, but thought working solely within the established labor parties was unduly constricting at a time when they felt the workers were going to be attracted to revolutionary politics. As James and others associated with the publication *Fight* were expelled from the ILP for advocating the creation of a Fourth International, and the International (or London) Bureau, a body of left social-democrats overseeing the activities of seemingly dissident political parties, balked at withdrawing from the Independent Labour Party, divisions among Trotsky's long-separated supporters only worsened.

By the time Trotsky and Cannon were pushing for the formation of the Fourth International in the summer of 1938, there were thus a number of discernible/ostensible Trotskyist groupings in Britain. The old Bolshevik-Leninist Group in the Labour Party had come out openly as the Militant Group in January 1937, agitating inside the Party for the politics of Trotskyism without, however, calling for the formation of the Fourth International. Militant helped bring into being the Socialist Left Federation [SLF] inside the Labour Party, but it clashed with Reg Groves and his Marxist League, this latter group exercising considerable influence in the SLF. The Militants were eventually expelled from the SLF, and formed a rival body, the Militant Labour League, late in 1937. Along the way, a South African Trotskyist, Ralph Lee, split from Militant to form the Workers International League [WIL], while in Edinburgh and Glasgow a break-away from the DeLeonite Socialist Labor Party evolved toward Trotskyism, founded the Revolutionary Socialist Party [RSP], and made contact with Trotsky's supporters. Perhaps most critically, the Marxist League of Reg Groves and Hugo Dewar dissolved in October 1937, leaving a rump organization, the Ad-Hoc Committee of the Marxist League, led by Harry Wicks, to fuse with C.L.R. James's Marxist Group, forming the Revolutionary Socialist League [RSL]. Many of these Trotskyist elements worked in the campaign to exonerate Trotsky from the allegations of socialist betrayal evident in the Moscow Trials. In Great Britain, however, according to Wicks, "The Trials closed many more minds than they opened." Groves, sadly, had experienced enough division to

sour his view of any future amalgamation of Trotskyist groups. He bid adieu to organized Trotskyist politics.³⁰

To describe this complicated and fissured political scene as byzantine would not do it justice. This was the situation as Cannon prepared to go to Europe in the summer of 1938. Concerned that C.L.R. James be drawn into the Fourth International, Trotsky feared that much could go awry with the hostile attitude toward the establishment of such a body by Hendrick Sneevliet and the Belgian section and the “practical boycott on the part of the Dutch.” Recognizing that Shachtman’s language skills and past connections with European Trotskyists could prove useful in the proceedings to found a new International, Trotsky was also aware that Max’s past record was not without blemish. The New Yorker had alienated comrades in the United Kingdom in the past. Trotsky wrote to Cannon that “some British comrades had at one time the impression of having been treated a bit without respect by Comrade Shachtman during his visit to London. They haven’t forgotten it even to this day. We can regret such a mood but it is necessary to reckon with it in the future.” As an original member of the International Secretariat’s Executive Committee, Trotsky also reported that Shachtman’s work left much to be desired. Communications went unanswered and this led to an “atmosphere of doubt and even suspicion toward the American section.” Since Trotsky was convinced that the United States Trotskyists were “destined to play first violin at the conference,” and Shachtman’s presence was both necessary and a *fait accompli*, the “Old Man” both confided in Cannon and relied on him to carry the day, particularly in the delicate negotiations with fragmented supporters in Britain.³¹

Trotsky apprised Cannon in mid-May 1938 of the state of the groups in England and Scotland. He passed on a communication sent to him by Ken Alexander [Johnson] of the Militant Labour League. Alexander, whose desire for unity was premised on insistence that the Trotskyist groups coming together agree to work in the Labour Party, was not sanguine about the prospects of amalgama-

30 Guides to the confusing British developments outlined in the above paragraphs include Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson, *Against the Stream: A History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain, 1924–1938* (Worcester: Socialist Platform, 1986); Harry Wicks, *Keeping My Head: The Memoirs of a British Bolshevik* (London: Socialist Platform, 1992); Martin Richard Upham, “The History of British Trotskyism to 1949,” PhD dissertation, University of Hull, 1980; and there is a condensed outline in Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985*, 437–453. See also Will Reisner, ed., *Documents of the Fourth International: The Formative Years (1933–1940)* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 79.

31 Trotsky to Cannon, 26 August 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 414–416; Trotsky to Cannon, 21 January 1938; 17 May 1938, “International Files,” General Correspondence, 1931–1963, Box 20, Folders 1–9/Reel 26, JPC Papers.

tion. He had no liking for Groves, whom he insisted presided over a tendency that had largely imploded, those “clinging to his coattails ... all out for Labour Party careers.” James, recognized by Alexander as the most talented individual in the Marxist Group, was pegged as inclining toward B.J. Field, heading up a faction that considered Trotsky “a liability to the movement.” In spite of his “excellent speaking ability and good brain,” Alexander thought James “a hopeless egoist,” thoroughly “unreliable.” Sooner or later, he warned, James would “break with our movement.”³²

The International Secretariat instructed Cannon to do what he could to unite the contentious Trotskyist organizations in Britain, an intervention that obviously rankled some of the leading cadre in the United Kingdom. Wicks later complained that Cannon and Shachtman were parachuted into England and Scotland to “bang heads together.” Shachtman in fact was not part of the original American delegation, which consisted of Cannon, Nathan Gould, and Frank L. Demby, a former Fieldite. Adding his voice to the unity chorus, Shachtman apparently arrived later. Cannon relied on Walter Goldwater in London to make arrangements, but communicated himself with the Glasgow-Edinburgh based RSP, and arranged meetings with James and the RSL, the Militant Group, and the Workers International League.

In the end, Cannon was able to piece together a fragile unity and peace agreement, under which a new, amalgamated organization took the name of the Revolutionary Socialist League. Central to the unification was the ambiguous agreement that “the *main emphasis* should be placed on work in the Labour Party without making Labour Party membership compulsory upon those comrades who have not been members up to now.” A common publication was to be supported, *Workers’ Fight*, which replaced the propaganda organs of the three signing bodies, the RSP, the RSL, and the Militant Group. The provisional Executive Committee of the new RSL was to be composed of members of all of the signing organizations, and all public disagreement and factional activity was suspended for a period of six months, it being considered that “past conflicts [were] liquidated.” With the agreement ratified unanimously by the respective memberships of the three organizations, a “national” conference was to be held in six months, with the election of a unified Executive. Meanwhile, Denzil Harber of the Militant Group, Frank Maitland of the RSP, and C.L.R. James of the original RSL were delegated to attend the International Conference where the founding of the Fourth International was to be discussed.

32 Trotsky to Cannon, 17 May 1938 with enclosure, Excerpt from Letter of Alexander, “International Files,” General Correspondence, 1931–1963, Box 20, Folders 1–9/Reel 26, JPC Papers.

The Workers International League declined to sign the unity pact, protesting that it was being stitched together precipitously, without adequate resolution of the differences among the groups on issues like entry and the Labour Party. Much discussion apparently turned on more abstract issues, with Trotsky's draft transitional program being held out as the central document on which a fusion of the differentiated British Trotskyist groups must proceed. Cannon maintained in private communications that he thought there were indications that the WIL would soon be "drawn into the unification," and Gould was of the view that Cannon was impressed with the hold-outs and would have done "anything to get them into the united organization." Yet when the WIL, also known as the Lee Group (after Ralph Lee, the South African Trotskyist leader of the tendency), could not afford to send delegates to the Parisian conference, and petitioned to be affiliated as a sympathizing body to the Fourth International, it was assailed by Willie Tait of the former RSP. Cannon acknowledged in a private communication to Trotsky that in Britain the question of how to work in and with the Labour Party remained contentious, and in certain circles "friction undoubtedly exists." There were those, like a faction within the James group, who "were still debating the French turn from the point of view of Field-Oehler." Cannon was especially concerned that the young membership of the WIL "have been deeply poisoned with personal antagonism to the leadership of the Militant Group," and reported to Trotsky that Lee's followers were "pounded mercilessly at the unification conference." A resolution at the Founding Conference of the Fourth International repudiated the group's supposed "unprincipled clique politics" and claimed that it had declined to present its views to the Trotskyist gathering. Cannon ultimately concluded that the WIL could not be assimilated to the Fourth International. Anti-Cannon elements in the British Trotskyist movement have long attributed all of this to "Cannon's factional hostility to the WIL group," and to his impatience with theoretical and programmatic concerns. Cannon's stubborn inclination to resolve disputes organizationally rather than politically, as well as his background in "Comintern-type manipulation" associated with Zinoviev, are cited. Yet there appears little in the actual evidence to suggest that Cannon alone was responsible for the attacks on the WIL in 1938, although the statement castigating the Lee Group was subsequently published in the *Socialist Appeal*.³³

33 The above paragraphs draw on Hansen, "James P. Cannon The Internationalist," in documents prepared for publication by George Breitman, "The Founding of the International (1938)," 27–28; Cannon to Goldwater, 1 July 1938; Cannon to Maitland, 1 July 1938; Cannon to Mercer, 1 July 1938; Cannon to Comrades (copy to Hansen/Trotsky), 6 August 1938; "Unity and Peace Agreement," no date, August 1938, all in Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Alexander,

Cannon was also criticized for luring James away from Britain to work in the United States. Harry Wicks and others were left to fight it out within the obviously incompletely unified British Trotskyist movement, butting heads with their old Militant Group adversary, Denzil Harber. The results were less than edifying. Wicks considered the loss of James a severe blow, one more Cannon machination. James later insisted that he was “invited” to the United States, was pleased to go, and contributed much to important work among African Americans. In any case, as much as the loss of James to the British Trotskyist movement was formidable, it was not likely that his presence there would have reversed the ongoing fragmentation of the movement; the “scotch-tape” unification, as it would later be derided by some, failed to effectively consolidate a coherent corps of advocates of Trotsky’s Fourth International. “Our League did not make much progress,” concluded Wicks in disappointment. Subsequent commentary, aware of how little unity was actually achieved, was harsh, laying the blame for the failure to achieve a lasting realignment of British Trotskyism on Cannon’s bureaucratic inclinations: “Cannon came to Britain and unified four groups into seven.” Cannon’s apparent imperiousness also rankled: Al Richardson recycled decades later the story of how the American swp leader “came to Edinburgh to make contact with the Revolutionary Socialist Party ... he received their delegates in his hotel room without deigning to rise from his bed.”³⁴

International Trotskyism, 1929–1985, esp. 454–455; Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson, *War and the International: A History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain, 1937–1949* (Exeter: Socialist Platform, 1986), 23–25, 102; Reisner, ed., *Documents of the Fourth International*, 268–270. The attack on the Lee Group appeared in “On Unification of the British Section,” *Socialist Appeal*, 2nd section, 22 October 1938, along with other similar statements, such as “On the Molinier Group,” which expelled Molinier, but welcomed members of his group to join the Fourth International. For a recent unconvincing attack on Cannon as a Zinoviev-like bureaucrat see “Trotsky’s Suppressed Letter: An Introduction by Alan Woods,” *In Defence of Marxism*, 1 February 2019, <https://www.marxist.com/trotsky-s-suppressed-letter>, accessed 22 February 2019. This anti-Cannon statement makes a great deal out of very little, speculating that Trotsky’s praise of the WIL establishing a printing press would have angered Cannon greatly because it somehow undermined the personal prestige of the American leader. This supposedly resulted in a deliberate suppression of the Trotsky letter and poisoned Cannon’s attitude to the WIL. All of this is speculation.

- 34 Wicks, *Keeping My Head*, 181–186; Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985*, 453–458. Richardson’s story of Cannon being in bed while meeting the RSP comrades in Edinburgh appears in Al Richardson Reply to Paul Le Blanc, *Revolutionary History*, 4 (Spring 1993), 212. For James and the United States see Interview with C.L.R. James by Al Richardson, Clarence Chrysostom, and Anna Grimshaw, South London, 16 November 1986, <http://www.revolutionary.history.co.uk>, accessed 2 September 2018. “Scotch-tape” unity is a phrase used in Bornstein and Richardson, *War and the International*, 23.

Trotsky and Cannon no doubt viewed the situation differently. Cannon spent two weeks in discussions with various Trotskyist groups, succeeded in bringing three of them together, and, at first, the resulting United Executive seemed to be running smoothly. A British Trotskyist section of 200 now existed, with the prospects of growth good. Day and night meetings consumed Cannon's time; he considered it a luxury to sleep for two straight hours. At the end of it all Cannon was exhausted. He treated himself to a weekend off with his half-brother Jack, with whom Cannon had little contact since the difficult days of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Writing to Rose, Jim seemed pleased with his accomplishments: "The comrades here are very enthusiastic and satisfied with our work and the unification. It gives us more authority in France and in the pre-conference work generally."³⁵

As Cannon, Shachtman, and Gould made their way from Great Britain to Europe, they were joined by Emanuel Geltman. The founding Conference of the new Trotskyist International, later falsely announced to have taken place "somewhere in Switzerland," convened in an atmosphere of fearful apprehension. The Munich crisis was unfolding, with Nazi Germany demanding aggressively its right to annex parts of Czechoslovakia's so-called "Sudentenland." War seemed imminent. Stalin's GPU had taken the message of the Moscow Trials into a guerrilla campaign of extermination. Erwin Wolf [Braun] of the International Secretariat was kidnapped and murdered in Spain; a former Stalinist agent who joined the Trotskyists, Ignaz Reiss, was assassinated in Switzerland; and Rudolf Klement, the central figure involved in organizing the Fourth International Conference, was brutally slaughtered in Paris, his body dismembered, stuffed in a suitcase, and thrown into the Seine. Documents relating to the Trotskyist gathering in Klement's possession were stolen in the attack.³⁶ In this context, the small group that met at the country home of Trotsky's friend, Alfred Rosmer, in the French village of Périgny, 30 miles from Paris, did so clandestinely, declaring, "No conference of revolutionists ever met under circumstances more tense or faced tasks of such supreme historical gravity than did this one."³⁷

35 Cannon to Jack, 1 July 1938; Jim to Rose, 1 August 1938; Cannon to Comrades, 6 August 1938, Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers. See also the brief note, "English Groups Unite to Build 4th International," *Socialist Appeal*, 20 August 1938.

36 "G.P.U. Kidnaps Sec'y of IV International," *Socialist Appeal*, 23 July 1938; Frank Demby, "Await Nazi Move in Czechoslovakia," *Socialist Appeal*, 27 August 1938; "G.P.U. Assassins and Their Victim: Murder of Reiss Seek Life of Trotsky," *Socialist Appeal*, 24 September 1938; Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929-1985*, 268; Drucker, *Shachtman and His Left*, 96-97.

37 Reisner, ed., *Documents of the Fourth International*, 157.

Thirty people made their way to the one-day retreat, the proceedings taking place on 3 September 1938. They represented organizations from eleven countries, although national sections that regularly affiliated with the Trotskyist International Secretariat but could not attend probably pushed the state territories involved to over thirty. Shachtman presided over the sessions, his facility with language allowing him to act as kind of universal translator, drawing on English, French, German, Russian, and a little Polish, as well as Yiddish, which proved particularly helpful in discussions involving eastern European delegates. Guided by Trotsky's "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International," the assembled revolutionaries heard Pierre Naville's report of the International Secretariat, which made it clear that the new entity was anything but a mass body. Discussions ensued on international theses – labor; the USSR; and war – as well as on matters relating to international solidarity and commissions dealing with affiliates in various countries. It was the American delegates, primarily Cannon and Shachtman, who functioned, in Cannon's later words, as "reporters on the Transitional Program," the experience of the Socialist Workers Party having been central to the development of the document. Cannon claimed that the "leadership of the international movement" in this formative period was forged as a "Trotsky-American axis." The accelerated deliberations left little time for controversy and debate, but the Polish delegates, provided with a document written by Isaac Deutscher, opposed the formation of what they considered a fictional Fourth International, and argued instead that Trotskyists should remain a propaganda organization until they secured the support of some truly mass parties. With Cannon, Shachtman, and Naville among those opposing this line of thinking, the final vote was 19–3 in favor of forming the Fourth International, with the two Polish delegates joined by a French comrade in opposition. Also formed was a Youth International, and an Executive Committee, which included Cannon and Shachtman, as well as Trotsky as a "secret" member. Trotsky considered Cannon's European efforts to bring the Fourth International into being unrivalled, writing to Rose Karsner in mid-September 1938: "It seems that Jim is doing an excellent job in Europe. ... I regret that we don't have a couple of Jims more. At least one for Europe."³⁸

38 Cannon, "Internationalism and the SWP," in Cannon, *Speeches to the Party*, 70; Trotsky to Karsner, 13 September 1938, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1937–1938]*, 448. For Cannon's report to Trotsky on his work in Europe leading to and developing out of the Conference founding the Fourth International see Cannon to Trotsky, 19 October 1938, reprinted in Joseph Hansen, "James P. Cannon The Internationalist," 28–30.

The founding conference of the Fourth International provided little more than a whirlwind tour of a plethora of issues, from the statutes governing the body to the conditions under which national sections could work with rival socialist bodies. The proceedings were capped with three resolutions. They drew on Trotsky's "Transitional Program." A revolutionary approach to war in the Far East was outlined, identifying China as engaged in a struggle for liberation. The United States was designated the world's leading imperialist power. Priority was placed on defending the revolutionary heritage of 1917, it being explained that only a workers' mobilization to overthrow the Stalinist dictatorship could preserve the gains of Bolshevism's earlier triumph.

In attendance among the small contingent of revolutionary Fourth Internationalists addressing these issues was Mark Zborowski [Etienne]. He was a GPU agent. Having infiltrated the French Trotskyist section, he befriended Trotsky's son Leon Sedov, and likely advised him to attend to his 1938 attack of acute appendicitis at a Parisian Russian clinic, which Zborowski arranged to have Sedov taken to, at the same time that he informed Soviet intelligence forces that this was happening. At the clinic Sedov was operated on. Complications developed, yet Trotsky's son apparently received no further treatment and, after finally being transported to a hospital, died. Etienne may well have had a hand in the murders of a number of Trotskyists, among them Rudolf Klement.³⁹

Cannon returned to the United States from this founding conference to a regular schedule of speaking engagements, addressing the strong spirit of peace that he saw evident among the masses of France. Late in October 1938 he

39 The above paragraphs draw on numerous sources. Coverage of the founding of the Fourth International was delayed in the United States, appearing in late October 1938. See Max Shachtman, "Congress Climaxes 15 Years' Struggle," James P. Cannon, "Ten Years of the Fight to Build a Revolutionary Party in the US," Nathan Gould, "Nine Countries Represented at Youth Congress," V.R. Dunne, "Revolutionary Tasks and Work in the Trade Union Movement," and "Thirty Delegates from Eleven Countries Raise New Banner," *Socialist Appeal*, 22 October 1938, with follow-up coverage in a second section of the *Socialist Appeal* of the same date, including Leon Trotsky, "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International." Deutscher and the Polish resistance to the formation of the Fourth International is discussed in Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast*, 420–422, which also addresses Etienne's presence. On Etienne-Zborowski see as well Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985*, 281–285; Jean van Heijenoort, *With Trotsky in Exile: From Prinkipo to Coyoacan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 92–99; Susan Weissman, "Mark 'Etienne' Zborowski: Portrait of a Deception, Part 1," *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*, 39 (No. 4, 2011), 583–609. A number of relevant statements/documents from the conference appear in Reisner, ed., *Documents of the Fourth International*, 157–302, which should be supplemented with the statement on the Soviet Union, "The Fourth International Defends the Soviet Union: Preservation of the Conquests of 1917 Depends on the Overthrown of the Stalinist Dictatorship," *Socialist Appeal*, 22 October 1938.

joined Shachtman, Burnham, Antoinette Konikow and Trotsky on airwaves at a “Grand Celebration Mass Meeting” in New York’s Center Hotel, heralding the founding of the Fourth International and ten years of struggle to build a revolutionary workers’ party in the United States. Insisting that the formation of the Fourth International represented a revolutionary continuity reaching back to 1917 and the Revolution in Russia, embraced by a significant sector of American Marxists, Cannon detailed how, with capitalism in collapse, and the Soviet Union under the thumb of Stalinist retreat, only those dedicated to the first principles of organizing the revolution would triumph:

The founding of the Fourth International raises our national struggle to higher ground, gives us greater strength and wider vision. It is a symbol of the great hope of the working class. It is the invincible banner of revolutionary workers in every country of the world.

We aim to build – and we invite you to join us in building – a party in the United States which will be a worthy section of the Fourth International. That is, a party with a scientific program, an honest party that tells the truth to the workers, a democratic workers’ party, and at the same time a disciplined party, united with revolutionary workers in all lands in one army for one idea, one program, one goal. **That goal is nothing less than the workers’ conquest of the world.**

Cannon also honored his old comrade Antoinette Konikow, who celebrated her fiftieth anniversary in the revolutionary movement. Her endurance and tenacity, Cannon stated, “personify the unconquerable spirit of our great movement.” He saluted her as a “veteran of the old movements of the revolutionary proletariat” and a “valiant pioneer of the new movement that rises on its foundations.” In November 1938, Cannon also prepared to co-teach, with Shachtman and Burnham, a six-week class on “The Bridge to Revolutionary Action,” at the SWP’s Marxist School. Recognizing that the SWP and the Fourth International were small, struggling currents, lacking a mass base, Cannon’s belief was that the ten years of struggle that took him through expulsion from the Communist International in 1928 to the founding of a new Party and a new International in 1938 laid deep and strong foundations. The future was bright, and much could be built by concentrating the full energy of the Party and its International “on a direct approach to the workers’ mass movement” that kept a close eye on the unfolding global order.⁴⁰

40 “Cannon Reports on Strong Peace Spirit of Masses,” *Socialist Appeal*, 5 October 1938; “Trot-

As Cannon settled back into the work of the Socialist Workers Party in the United States at the end of 1938, the prospects looked promising. It was at this time that leading Socialist Party activists from the famous Flint Sit-Down strike, Genora and Kermit Johnson, bolted the flagging SP to join the SWP. Genora Johnson was a pivotal player in the important Women's Emergency Brigade, which contributed mightily to the famous Flint General Motors sit-down strike in early 1937. She relayed the lessons of that struggle to audiences at Socialist Workers Party halls in the fall of 1938: "Union men must utilize the courage of their women in their strike struggles. Without drawing women into social service, into the (worker's) militia, into political life, without tearing the women away from the stultifying domestic and kitchen atmosphere it is impossible to secure real freedom, it is impossible to build a democracy, let alone Socialism."⁴¹

Cannon was also enthusiastic about the arrival of C.L.R. James in New York, where his presence registered in putting Trotskyism as a political alternative before the African-American masses in new ways. He wrote to Trotsky in December 1938:

James gave us his first lecture this week. It was a great success. A very fine audience was completely enthused by his presentation of the question. In the meantime, he has also made quite an impression in the negro center in Harlem, and, as a result of his visit we have many new contacts there. As you know, we are planning the year and which will provide for an interlude during which he will visit you. This is a far better milieu for him than England. In a larger movement his peculiar talents as a propagandist and agitator find their best scope. In the cramped circle of the sectarian movement in England, his defects as a politician and organizer counteract his other positive qualities.⁴²

sky Will Speak," *Socialist Appeal*, 29 October 1938. "1,500 Hear Trotsky Speak at New York Mass Meeting; Antoinette Konikow Honored by Tribute at Tenth Anniversary Celebration; Cannon Points the Road Ahead," "Cannon Reviews the Past and Points to the Future," "National Committee Greets Konikow on 50th Anniversary," & "The Marxist School," *Socialist Appeal*, 5 November 1938; Cannon, "Ten Years of Struggle for a Workers' Party," *Socialist Appeal*, 22 October 1938; Cannon to Trotsky, 29 November 1938, "International Files," General Correspondence, 1931–1963, Box 20, Folders 1–9/Reel 26, JPC Papers.

41 See "Genora and Kermit Johnson, Leading Auto Workers, Quit S.P., Join S.W.P.," *Socialist Appeal*, 19 November 1938; "Large Audience Hears the Johnsons at Mpls. Forum," *Socialist Appeal*, 3 December 1938. On Genora Johnson [Dollinger] see Sol Dollinger and Genora Johnson Dollinger, *Not Automatic: Women and the Left in the Forging of the Auto Workers' Union* (New York: Monthly Review, 2000).

42 Cannon to Hansen/Trotsky, 8 December 1938, Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers. For James's first activities in the United States see "C.L.R. James, Noted Negro Militant, To Speak on Decline

Excited by what James brought to the SWP and its work, Cannon hoped that there would be the possibility of the Caribbean activist-intellectual remaining in the United States permanently.

For his part, Trotsky pushed Cannon to coordinate more rigorously the relations of the party press, reconstituting the *Socialist Appeal* to make it a "genuine instrument of political action," and developing the theoretical organ of the movement, the *New International*. Having hammered away previously at the necessity of building the Socialist Workers Party through recruitment of a working-class base and promoting able proletarian elements to the leading bodies/committees of the organization, Trotsky advocated creating the new party in ways that broke with the inevitable tendency of intellectuals to predominate at the highest levels of party life. "The task," Trotsky stressed, was "to break with the routine, which is the beginning of bureaucratism, to convince the organization and especially its leading stratum (which is more difficult) of the necessity of systematic renewal of the composition of all the leading bodies of the party." Trotsky thought this campaign might usefully address the issue of the Labor Party and work in the trade unions. He also wondered if it "would be timely now to create a special party committee for work among the women, with supplements" of SWP publications "illuminating the situation of worker women now under the crisis."⁴³

All of this augured well for the future of the Socialist Workers Party. It suggested, not unreasonably, that American Trotskyism was about to enter a new phase. Its expanded ranks, emerging from the Socialist Party entry and playing a prominent role in the founding of the Fourth International, appeared to be breaking out of the isolation and marginalization plaguing the American anti-Stalinist left since its birth in 1928–29.

The forward march of Trotskyism in both the United States and, in the small steps taken with the formation of the Fourth International, thus clearly raised Cannon's spirits. The dog days seemed a long time ago. His relations with Rose Karsner took on a new intensity, their love for one another sealed in intimate private correspondence that generally followed discussions of political developments. After summarizing what he genuinely felt were his accomplish-

of British Empire," *Socialist Appeal*, 19 November 1938; "C.L.R. James Addresses Big Meeting in New York," *Socialist Appeal*, 10 December 1938.

43 Trotsky to Cannon, 3 October 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1936–1937]*, 475–478; Trotsky to Cannon, 5 October 1938, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1937–1938]*, 37–39. Trotsky also offered advice on the youth section, which he felt should be accorded more independence and not brought under the sway of the Party leadership in a mechanical manner. See the documents in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1937–1938]*, 119–128, 136, 150–152.

ments in securing a “triple unity agreement” among British Trotskyists in late July/early August 1938, for instance, Cannon closed, “Now to the main point! I miss you most painfully. Eager to be home. Love you **in the same way** as stated in the letter I handed you upon my arrival in Los Angeles – but more intensely – your Jim.”⁴⁴

With Cannon on assignment in Paris in January 1939,⁴⁵ this love correspondence continued, along with signs that trouble was brewing for the Socialist Workers Party at home and for the Fourth International abroad. Rose wrote of a crisis approaching in the American auto sector, where Cannon and his protégé, Bert Cochran, had hopes of further Trotskyist advances in the labor movement. Alluding obliquely to how this crisis was adversely affecting the young SWP in Cannon’s absence, Rose reported, “Your guiding hand is already beginning to be missed.” On the other side of the Atlantic, Cannon confided that the proverbially testy French section was creating some fractious moments inside the Fourth International. But relations between the loving revolutionary couple were close and affectionate. Jim conducted an extensive, intimate, trans-Atlantic correspondence with Rose, who commented, “I received all five letters from you – that’s quite a record for a bad correspondent such as you are notoriously! And believe me I appreciate it. It makes me miss you not quite so poignantly.”

Rose also conveyed information about the couple’s blended family of three children: Ruth, Carl, and Walta. Cannon’s peripatetic and stressful lifestyle during the period of Socialist Party entry, coupled with his usual less-than-responsible habits around personal communications, often left him out of touch with his biological children. Quite close to Ruth, who at this point shared her father’s politics, Jim nonetheless had to ask comrades to “make an appointment” with her as he crisscrossed the country from California to New York in March 1937; he did not have “her address handy.” Carl, more distant from his father than his sister over the course of the 1930s (although he would later grow much closer), was apparently upbraided by Rose’s daughter Walta “for not appreciating [Jim] more.” Rose assured Jim that Carl “didn’t seem to resent it. On the contrary, I rather think he liked to see [Walta] so proud of you.” Even Rose confessed that there were times when she did not grasp fully Cannon’s

44 Cannon to Dearest, 1 August 1938, Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers.

45 The ongoing crisis in the French section was of growing concern to both Cannon and Trotsky at the end of 1938 and Trotsky wrote Cannon: “It is not necessary to say that your presence now in France would be of the greatest importance.” See Cannon to Trotsky, 29 November 1938; Trotsky to Rose Karsner, 30 November 1938; Trotsky to Cannon, 5 December 1938; Cannon to Trotsky, 8 December 1938, Box 4/Reel 4, JPC Papers.

difficulties, apologizing for being “so irritable with you at times when what you needed most was sympathy.” She implored him not to shut down his emotions, and to “talk out a bit, so I could get a picture!”

Like Jim, Rose was upbeat about the difficult stretch they had gone through, and saw the prospects for revolutionary advances quite positively. Referring to recent successes, Rose noted that, “On the whole it was the kids we acquired through our SP entry that made it all possible, even if Max, Jim, and Marty were in the lead. And without those harassing days and dog fights prior to and during our stay in the SP, as well as those that followed, we never would have been able to do what we did. But who saw it that way?”⁴⁶

Cannon, perhaps, had not always seen things absolutely clearly himself. But he groped his way, consistently and with dogged commitment, to a path for the politics of Trotskyism in the United States. From his first principled break with Stalinism and the program of “socialism in one country,” he was on new ground, guided by Trotsky, but often himself feeling out how to proceed. His relations with old comrades shifted ground, as Shachtman, Abern, and others moved out of his circle of confidantes to mount challenges to his leadership of the early Left Opposition that never quite managed to either oust Cannon or definitively reconstruct the bridges burned among these dissident communist comrades in the early 1930s. Aligned most closely with the Minneapolis senior comrades (Vincent Ray Dunne and Carl Skoglund), Cannon’s authority soared with their trade union victories, but it was his political insight and communist acumen that kept these staunch allies on revolutionary course. New recruits came to Cannon, and went, over the course of 1928–38, figures like Oehler and Stamm sustaining him for years only to break with their mentor over entry into the Socialist Party. If the Musteite fusion failed to solidify a Cannon-Muste partnership, young American Workers Party agitators and organizers were drawn to Cannon, as were Abern faction figures like Joe Hansen. Rose Karsner, of course, was a constant in Cannon’s life. She was the single revolutionary he relied on most decisively. An important part of what Rose shared with Jim was warm relations with younger comrades, such as Sam Gordon, who lived with Cannon and Karsner for a time, and whom Cannon

46 For a sample of the personal/political correspondence on which the above paragraphs rest see Cannon to Heart’s Darling, 19 January 1939; Cannon to Dearest, 20 January 1939; Cannon to Dearest, 22 January 1939; Cannon to Dearest, 23 January 1939; Cannon to My Dearest, 24 January 1939; Rose to My Dear, 27 January 1939; Rose to My Dear, no date [January 1939]; Rose to Dear, 10 February 1939; Rose to My love, 10 March 1939, all in Box 4, Reel 4, JPC Papers; Cannon to Arne and Al, 9 March 1937, Folder WP: March 1937, Chrono File, January – October 1937, Prometheus Research Library, New York, New York.

sent into the field as an industrial organizer, joining accomplished Cannonists Bert Cochran and George Clarke.

In a decade that saw some of the most tumultuous class struggles in the history of the United States, Cannon, as much as any other single individual, put American Trotskyism on the political map. He battled much, including a rebellious layer of opponents within his own movement whose personalized attacks on Cannon were as relentless as they were embittered. A part of their antagonism was – in the depth of the dog days – justified, for Cannon wrestled with his own demons, which at particular low ebbs left him somewhat incapacitated and unable to fulfill his responsibilities within the revolutionary movement. Yet Cannon bounced back. He contributed to and occasionally led important, if not always successful, trade union interventions among New York hotel workers, Illinois miners, west coast seamen and waterfront workers, and others. In Minneapolis, he was a pivotal behind-the-scenes participant in one of the most aggressive and far-reaching strikes in United States history, the 1934 teamsters' uprising building a vibrant labor movement culture, not only in one industry, but in a city that had once been a citadel of the open shop. In all of his trade union work, Cannon pushed forward the momentum of labor solidarity and militancy. This was to be, in general, a significant highpoint of 1930s achievements on the part of the American working class.

Above all, in refusing to succumb to the oscillating twists and turns of a degenerating Stalinist Communist International, social democratic evasions, or all manner of opportunisms, Cannon often had to take the hard road of principled revolutionary politics, in which easy victories were few, but the lessons rich and many. In defending Trotsky from the disingenuous slanders of the Moscow Trials, or refusing to turn a blind eye to the Comintern's role in sabotaging the insurgent impulses of working-class revolutionaries during the Spanish Civil War, Cannon stood the difficult ground that the particular moment demanded. If, at times, Cannon bent particular sticks too far in specific directions (as in his understandable antagonism to Stalinism or his expressions of impatience with factional opponents within the Trotskyist movement), he was generally able to bring himself back from the brink, before too much damage had been done.

These sensibilities, stands, and successes were inseparable from Cannon's revolutionary Trotskyist politics. He had the foresight and political will to build a Trotskyist party in a United States that was a most inhospitable climate for the birth of such an organization. His willingness to work through a fusion and an entry, necessarily having to negotiate and deal with political opponents he found not only difficult and disingenuous, but disgusting in their machinations, was a testimony to his understanding that Trotskyism's consolidation in the

United States demanded a great deal of those committed to the cause of making a revolutionary party. This also registered in personal loss, as close comrades like Oehler and Stamm broke ranks with Cannon over how such a party might be made, a factional struggle that highlighted the danger of sectarianism.

The entire history of the 1930s was, for Cannon, a demonstration of the necessity of overcoming the revolutionary left's historic divisions. This fragmentation cultivated weakness and ineffectiveness at the historic juncture when the working class, caught in the throes of capitalist crisis, desperately needed the leadership of a revolutionary organization:

As throughout the world since 1928, there had been a continuous and uninterrupted series of splits in the American movement. ... The movement was going through a period of pulverization, of pulling apart, until a new rise in the class struggle and a new verification of programs on the basis of world experiences could lay the ground for integration once again. ... The demoralization of the movement during that period was reflected in this trend to dispersal, this continuous process of splitting. This sickness had to run its course. Throughout that period, we Trotskyists were never unity shouters, especially in the first five years of our separate existence. We concentrated on the work of clarifying the program and rejected all talk about improvised unifications with groups not sufficiently close to us in what we considered then, and what we consider now, the question of all questions – that of the program.

On the basis of this revolutionary program, which rejected the Comintern's strategic orientation of building "socialism in one country," and its tactical orientations of Third Period adventurism and Popular Front opportunism, Cannon and others created, over 1928–38, the conditions and possibilities that led to the birth of the Socialist Workers Party, helping immeasurably in the creation of the Fourth International. These initiatives, in Cannon's words, began "a new process of regroupment and unification ... the first positive sign of a counter-process to the trend of disintegration, dispersal, and split."⁴⁷ This was Cannon's accomplishment in 1928–38, a decade that witnessed the emergence of American Trotskyism.

"We live in hopes," Cannon had written to Albert Glotzer in April 1929.⁴⁸ After ten years of struggle the hopes continued to animate the Kansas-born

47 Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, 190–192.

48 Cannon to Glotzer, 20 April 1929, Box 3, Folder 2, JPC Papers.

revolutionary. Cannon could look back on a decade in which he and his comrades achieved much. The future for Cannon and his brand of revolutionary politics never looked brighter. To be sure, the Great Depression continued, confirmation of capitalism's crisis-ridden nature. War loomed on the horizon. And Stalinism remained ensconced as the dominant political tendency on the left. Yet Trotskyists, confirmed in their critique of the degeneration of the Soviet Union by the revelations of Moscow Trials slander and the use of judicial murder to eliminate virtually the entire corps of Old Bolsheviks, were convinced that political truth was on their side. Events in Germany and Spain over the course of the 1930s revealed a Communist International incapable of mounting the kinds of campaigns that could resist and reverse the advancing tide of fascism. Cannon and his American comrades, from small, isolated, and precarious beginnings in 1928–29, managed to secure themselves a place of prominence in the Trotskyist possibilities that loomed so large a decade later. No longer merely a handful of dissidents on the fringes of the Communist Party, Cannon and his supporters were the largest and most influential section of an international movement. If the formation of the Fourth International revealed the limited personnel and influence of global Trotskyism, and the movement remained largely untested, it had a secure foundation of principled political intervention in the struggles of the time as its base of authority. Hope was indeed warranted.

Trotsky conveyed as much to Cannon in a September 1937 letter. Written after the expulsion of his followers from the American Socialist Party, on the eve of the formation of the Socialist Workers Party and the Fourth International, the communication may well have been influenced by Albert Glotzer writing to Trotsky that the internal regime of the American section was in need of “genuine democracy.” Such complaint was not new, and had long been directed at Cannon by Glotzer and his circle. Without mentioning Glotzer's missive, Trotsky alerted Cannon to the potential of the particular moment of the late 1930s, when much was at stake for those dedicated to building a movement of alternative to *both* Stalinism and capitalism, a politics of dissident mobilization that would transcend the limitations of liberalism and a clearly spent moderate reformism. Trotsky pushed Cannon in a general way about how best to conduct the next stages in building a Party of revolutionary socialism in the United States:

Our organization will become attractive to very different people in the next period, and not only for the best of them. The public life in the States is very agitated, and the recent announcement of the new crisis will aggravate the disquietude, the fighting spirit and ... the confusion.

We can't avoid having this confusion in our ranks. Our comrades are "too" educated, "too" accustomed to precise, elaborated conceptions and slogans. They have a contempt for everybody who is not ideologically 'o.k.' It is very dangerous. A developing and alive party must represent – to a certain extent – the different tendencies, disquietudes and, I repeat, even the confusion in the vanguard of the working class. Too much confusion is, of course, not good but a sound proportion can be established only through practice. More pedagogical patience is absolutely necessary on the part of our comrades towards the new and fresh elements. It is the genuine sense of party "democracy." I believe that for the next period the emphasis must be put on the *democracy*, not on the *centralism*. The necessary equilibrium between them will be established on the basis of the new experience.

As if to demonstrate his own sense of balance, Trotsky also reminded Glotzer that while "the leadership should be patient in its approach to the membership as the party should be in its approach to the working masses," there were methods "of fighting for party democracy which are very dangerous." The present leadership of American Trotskyism in its entirety, Trotsky insisted, was a result of a long period of selection, proven in struggle. Trying to change that leadership, and its orientation, Trotsky advised Glotzer, demanded the same patience and capacity to listen and reflect that was expected of Cannon and the Party majority he commanded.⁴⁹

In the immediate future the new experiences confronted by Trotskyism in the United States shattered an exuberant optimism that the movement would be galvanized by dynamic growth and breakthroughs into mass struggles. A tumultuous disagreement soon divided the leading figures of the movement over basic understandings of how to assess "the revolution betrayed." The programmatic divide over the nature of the Soviet Union evident at the founding of the Socialist Workers Party erupted, in 1939–40, into a contentious schism that saw Cannon and Shachtman finally part ways irrevocably. A profound split fractured the hopes and promise of 1938.⁵⁰

Other developments were no less challenging. Trotsky, murdered by a Stalinist assassin in 1940, was taken from the movement he founded, depriving Can-

49 Trotsky to Cannon, 11 September 1937 & Trotsky to Glotzer, 11 September 1937, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky* [1936–1937], 439–441.

50 As an introduction only see, for Cannon's perspective, James P. Cannon, *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972, original 1943); and for documents assembled to challenge this view Sean Matgamna, ed., *The Fate of the Russian Revolution: Lost Texts of*

non and others of his invaluable political leadership. With the outbreak of war and direct United States involvement in the hostilities during the early 1940s, the state unleashed a red-baiting assault on domestic Trotskyists, whose influence in Minneapolis trade union circles was considerable. Local 544, through its Trotskyist leaders and their labor movement publication, the *Northwest Organizer*, opposed United States intervention in World War II, considering it a contest among “imperialist bandit nations, fought for the right to exploit the peoples and resources of the world.” Early in April, 1940, the Minneapolis Central Labor Union passed a unanimous resolution opposing United States entry into the armed conflict and calling for “international militant working-class solidarity to stop the war.” Combined with Tobin’s longstanding animus to the Trotskyist leadership of the Minneapolis teamsters and Roosevelt’s preparations for war in the 1939–41 years, the stage was set for a draconian state assault on United States Trotskyists. This unfolded with raids on the Socialist Workers Party offices in Minneapolis and St. Paul in late June 1941, conducted by Federal Bureau of Investigation agents and US marshals, who seized records, literature, flags, pictures of Leon Trotsky, and other ostensibly inflammatory material. Arrests and indictments followed, with Cannon one of the 29 individuals charged with violating the Smith Act, legislation passed in 1940 that criminalized advocacy of overthrowing the government. This left Cannon, as well as a large contingent of the Socialist Workers Party and Local 544 leadership, jailed. In its direct attack on the powerful trade union forces of the Trotskyists in Minneapolis, this state repression also wrote finis to the influential place of Vincent Ray Dunne, Carl Skoglund, and other revolutionaries in the city’s labor movement, ending a decade of militancy that had transformed class relations in an archetypal American city.⁵¹

Critical Marxism, Volume 1 (London: Phoenix Press, 1998); Matgamna, ed., *The Fate of the Russian Revolution: The Two Trotskyisms Confront Stalinism*, Volume 2 (London: Workers’ Liberty, 2015).

- 51 On the Smith Act persecution of the Trotskyists see James P. Cannon, *Socialism on Trial: Testimony at Minneapolis Sedition Trial*, edited by Steve Clark (New York: Pathfinder, 2014); and for a mainstream scholarly account, Donna Haverty-Stacke, *Trotskyists on Trial: Free Speech and Political Persecution since the Age of FDR* (New York: New York University Press, 2015). My own view is outlined in Bryan D. Palmer, “‘Gagging the Revolutionary Party’: The First Smith Act Trial and the Rule of Law,” in Judith Fudge and Eric Tucker, eds., *The Class Politics of Law: Essays Inspired by Harry Glasbeek* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2019), 171–188. Barry Eidlin, “‘Upon this foundering rock’: Minneapolis Teamsters and the Transformation of US Business Unionism, 1934–1941,” *Labor History*, 50 (August 2009), 249–267, argues that the defeat of Local 544 preceded the Smith Act Trial as the state, complementing the assault on the Trotskyist leadership of the local by Dan Tobin and the IWT bureaucracy, used the

Advances registered in many fields, including ongoing work in the trade unions and important civil rights agitations. Optimism continued. Cannon and his comrades in the Socialist Workers Party fought as they had in the past. Yet there would be no denying that the 1940s were difficult years of persistent and intensifying factionalism, compounded by state repression and material circumstances which insured that Trotskyism was too often limited to defensive struggles to achieve the American Revolution that had always been Cannon's ultimate goal.

At a sixtieth birthday celebration in 1950, Cannon recalled how he and Rose Karsner confronted their break from Stalinism in 1930:

When we were forty we took stock of the situation at that time. That was when we had been expelled from the Communist Party for defending the program of Trotsky, and had to start all over again. We were forty – that's older than twenty – a little tired. We realized that revolution is rather a young people's occupation, like athletics. But we had to recognize that the movement depended upon us more than ever then, and that we had to make an exception of ourselves. So we said: we'll give ten more years to the party.

Those ten years were indeed, in Cannon's words, "busy, active years." There seemed no time "to count them." When they were over, Cannon was older again, but he was proud that he had carried forward the socialist aspirations of his youth, that he had personally provided the American left with a red thread of revolutionary continuity. "Every man's younger self is his better self," Cannon insisted. He had come out of Rosedale, Kansas, a twenty-year old Wobbly, "looking for truth and justice." He found answers in the Russian Revolution, and he remained committed to its purpose, rather than acquiescing in its demise, which he experienced over the course of the mid-to-late 1920s. Trotskyism provided Cannon, who came to the politics of the Left Opposition cautiously, with an understanding of how to revive the promise of 1917. He never found it possible to "even think of renouncing my citizenship in the socialist future of humanity." Cannon thus gave his "ten more years" to building the revolutionary party that he saw as necessary to the creation of that "golden future" that Jack London once described as having "no servants, naught but the service of

Minnesota Labor Relations Act of 1939 to virtually outlaw the dissident militants who had pioneered the 1934 trade union upsurge. Eidlin quotes the *Northwest Organizer*, 25 May 1940; 18 April 1940 on the anti-war positions of Local 544 and the Minneapolis Central Labor Union.

love.” In the process, James P. Cannon helped transform the development of the American left, leaving a militant, revolutionary footprint on the landscape of class relations in the world’s most powerful capitalist nation.⁵²

52 James P. Cannon, “Sixtieth Birthday Speech,” in Cannon, *Speeches for Socialism* (New York: Pathfinder, 1971), 253–226, quoting Jack London.

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Time, 1934, 1941
The Worker, 1928
Young Spartacus, 1931–35

Writings of James P. Cannon

What follows is a selected listing of Cannon's publications in the 1928–38 years with which this book is concerned. It is not a complete compilation and excludes editorial notes and other writings, particularly unsigned statements. Collections of Cannon's

speeches, statements, letters and published articles that appeared after 1938, but that may contain material relevant to the 1928–38 period are included at the end of this listing.

- 1928, "For the Russian Opposition! Against Opportunism and Bureaucracy in the Workers (Communist) Party," *The Militant*, 27 October (with Martin Abern and Max Shachtman).
- 1928, "Fortress of the World Revolution," *The Militant*, 15 November.
- 1928, "Concerning our Expulsion: A Letter to a Comrade," *The Militant*, 15 November.
- 1928, "The Party 'Discussion' Opens," *The Militant*, 1 December.
- 1928, "Trotsky's Book and Its Bourgeois Critics: A Review of 'The Real Situation in Russia,'" *The Militant*, 1 December.
- 1928, "Gangsterism!" *The Militant*, 15 December.
- 1929, "Our Appeal to the Party Members," *The Militant*, 1 January.
- 1929, "A Burglary – Its Political Meaning," *The Militant*, 1 January.
- 1929, "Platform of the Communist Opposition," *The Militant*, 15 February & 22 February (with Martin Abern, Max Shachtman, and Arne Swabeck).
- 1929, "The Communists and the 'Progressives,'" *The Militant*, 1 March.
- 1929, "Call for a National Conference of the Opposition," *The Militant*, 15 March.
- 1929, "The Labor Revolt in the South," *The Militant*, 15 April (unsigned).
- 1929, "Organize the Unorganized Communists," *The Militant*, 15 April.
- 1929, "The Lost Leader," *The Militant*, 1–15 May.
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- 1929, "A Letter to the International Labor Defense," *The Militant*, 1–15 May (with Max Shachtman and Rose Karsner).
- 1929, "Conference of the Opposition Communists," *The Militant*, 1 June.
- 1929, "The Crisis in the Communist Party," *The Militant*, 1 August.
- 1929, "Vincent St. John," *The Militant*, 1 August.
- 1929, "Where is the Left Wing Going? An Answer to William Z. Foster with a Footnote on His Political Biography," *The Militant*, 15 August.
- 1929, "The New Unions and the Communists," *The Militant*, 30 November.
- 1930, "The Struggle for the South," *The Militant*, 25 January.
- 1930, "The Socialist Party and Radicalization of the Masses," *The Militant*, 15 February 1930.
- 1930, "Passaic Strike Anniversary: Some Lessons in Militant Labor Leadership for the Future," *The Militant*, 22 February.
- 1930, "Karl Marx, The Man," *The Militant*, 19 April 1930.
- 1930, "Character and Limits of Our Faction: Lessons from Recent International Experiences of the Opposition," *The Militant*, 15 May.
- 1930, "The Plenum of the American Communist Opposition," *The Militant*, 7 June.

- 1930, "‘My Life’ And Its Critics," *The Militant*, 14 June.
- 1930, "Back to Lenin! Manifesto to the Rank and file and Seventh National Convention of the CPUSA," *The Militant*, 14 June (with Martin Abern, Albert Glotzer, Max Shachtman, Carl Skoglund, Maurice Spector, and Arne Swabeck).
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Index

- Abern, Martin [Marty] 1, 51–53, 65–66, 68–74, 147, 153, 195–201, 206–209, 230–33, 241–46, 248–53, 257, 260, 275–76, 295–96, 298, 303–7, 706–7, 712–15, 739–40, 786, 845–47, 884–85, 889–90, 943–44, 994, 999, 1114, 1157–58
- Abern Clique/cliquism 199, 257, 741, 786, 790, 800, 803–04, 828, 832, 836–37, 843, 845, 851, 872, 876, 886, 890, 896, 928, 942, 944–45, 1037
- Active Workers Conference 781, 787, 789, 1119
- Adamic, Louis 315, 507–09, 960–61, 964, 973, 1078
- African Americans, see also Black Belt Nation, race, “Negro Question” 82, 137, 141, 171, 176, 337–43, 344–55, 356–72, 375, 377–79, 754–55, 757–58, 798, 860, 931–32, 1039–42
- Akron, Ohio 82, 828, 834, 845–46, 1096–97
- Albany State Conference for Labor Legislation 386–91
- Alinsky, Saul 521
- Alexander, Robert 48
- Alexander, Ken [Johnson] 1134–36
- Allard, Gerry [Germinal] 98, 115–16, 153, 161, 402, 407, 415–22, 424, 428–37, 440–45, 447–61, 726, 732, 787, 836–37
- Allard, Irene 726
- Allentown, Pennsylvania 747, 753, 787, 818–20, 827, 834, 836, 841
- Altman, Jack 837, 852, 889–90, 901, 909–10, 912, 914, 916, 924–25, 928–29, 934, 1009, 1013–14, 1019–20, 1024–33
- Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union 213, 713, 961
- Amalgamated Food Workers Union 468–70, 473–74, 476, 486
- Amalgamated Textile Workers Union [ATW] 722
- American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU] 74, 79, 406, 955
- American Committee for Asylum for Trotsky 955
- American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky [ACDLT/Trotsky Defense Committee] 898, 902, 920, 951–52, 958–73, 977–78, 997, 999, 1000, 1003, 1006, 1009, 1011, 1013–14, 1021, 1031–1033
- American Federation of Labor [AFL] 160, 169, 176, 389, 433, 470, 474, 508, 515–516, 524, 692, 695, 722, 724, 780–81, 815, 818, 898, 1042, 1050–51, 1057, 1065–66, 1097, 1119, 1127, 1159
- American Labor Party [ALP] 321, 333, 905, 908, 920, 931, 1022
- American Socialist Monthly* 881, 913, 915, 922, 1012
- American Workers Party [AWP], see also A.J. Muste, Musteites 376, 512–14, 516, 691, 710, 721–23, 725–29, 731–39, 741–51, 743–44, 745–46, 748, 769, 770, 773, 776, 783, 785–86, 800, 802, 818, 956, 1053
- Angelo, Joseph 27, 98, 116, 161, 238, 415–20, 424, 430–38, 441–42, 444, 446, 450, 452, 455, 457–58, 735, 782
- Appeal Institute (Socialist Party, Left-Wing) 860, 878–79, 891, 899, 901, 902–03, 905, 909–13, 923–24, 927, 1014, 1121
- Arnesen, Eric 3, 17–18
- auto sector/automobile workers 754, 786, 1080, 1082, 1084, 1087–89, 1094, 1096–1100
- Auto Workers Educational League 1082–83
- Barcelona (Spanish Civil War) 1017, 1019–20, 1022–26, 1029–32, 1036, 1125
- Baron, Murray 853, 910, 916, 1021, 1027–28
- Baron, Sam 1020–21, 1026–29
- Barrett, James R. 11, 20–22
- Basky, Frank 119–21
- Basky, Louis 87, 89, 119–21, 243–44, 755, 779, 782, 788, 791, 802, 811, 943
- Basky, Lucas 87, 89, 121
- Battle of Deputies Run 496–98, 568, 582–84, 590, 596, 637
- Bauer, Erwin/Eugene [Ackerknecht] 772, 698, 806, 811, 832
- Beal, Fred 1126
- Beals, Carleton 981, 988–92, 997
- Bellini, Joe 1058, 1062, 1068, 1073
- Benjamin, Herbert 82–83

- Birney, Earle [Robertson] 203, 740–41
- Bittelman, Alexander 51, 63–65, 67–68, 110, 135, 137–38, 944
- Black Belt Nation 338–39, 343–51, 353, 355, 357, 361–65, 368, 372–74, 376–79
- Bleeker, Sylvia 132, 154, 177, 211, 437, 463, 723
- Bloody Friday 629, 631, 634, 637–39, 641, 655
- Bolshevik-Leninist Group [GBL]/Militant Group (Britain) 702, 715–716, 1134, 1136–38
- Bolshevism/Bolshevik (Russian) Revolution xi, xiv, 9–10, 12, 19, 24, 33, 36–37, 41–43, 46, 49–50, 52, 54–55, 70, 77, 91, 100, 123–24, 136, 159, 211, 232, 256, 301, 304, 312, 325, 377, 467, 494, 701, 703, 705, 708, 715, 718, 727, 745, 749, 752, 763, 784, 809, 886–87, 950, 962, 967–68, 1000, 1004–6, 1032, 1122, 1141, 1150–52
- Boggs, James 378
- Boggs, Grace Lee 378, 740
- Bosch, John, see also Farmers' Holiday Association 555, 615
- Boston 69, 82–83, 119, 123–25, 210, 240, 243–44, 284, 354, 721, 735, 783, 835, 966, 1005
- Breier, Louis 783–84
- Breitman, George 117, 333–34, 812, 834, 1124, 1128
- Breton, André 996
- Bridges, Harry 511, 884, 959, 1036, 1043, 1068, 1125, 1127
- Brookwood Labor College 433–434, 440, 512, 723–24, 766, 846
- Browder, Bill 536, 538, 541–42, 544–45, 592, 603, 621–22, 624, 640, 649–50, 862, 864, 1055–57, 1073–76, 1132
- Browder, Earl 21–22, 63, 93, 96, 163, 175–76, 380, 597–98, 815, 822, 905, 911, 970–971, 1084, 1088, 1131
- Brown, Bill [William S.] 526–27, 536–38, 541–42, 544–45, 551–52, 558, 564, 583, 588, 592, 601, 603, 606, 614, 616, 618, 621–24, 630, 638, 640, 649–50, 653–54, 659, 664, 668, 862, 864, 1055–57, 1073–76, 1132
- Brown, Irving, see also Revolutionary Policy Committee [RPC] 766–67, 769
- Budenz, Louis 459, 473, 514, 516, 723–24, 726, 729, 734, 736, 747, 782–83, 802, 818
- Budenz, Margaret Rogers 726
- Buehler, A.A. [Shorty] 104, 165, 189, 257, 306, 397, 796
- Bukharin, Nikolai 37, 59, 61–63, 173–75
- Bunker, Thomas 224–25, 411–413
- Burnham, James [West] 726, 730, 734, 746–47, 749, 780, 787, 790–92, 795, 800, 806–8, 822–24, 828, 837, 845–48, 852–53, 859–61, 867, 872–76, 879–81, 889–90, 892–99, 906–8, 911–12, 920, 923–28, 932, 935, 937, 944, 946, 948, 956, 961, 980, 998–1000, 1017, 1020, 1024–30, 1114, 1118, 1121–22, 1129, 1142
- Caldis, Aristodimos [Kaldis] 467–69, 471–72, 474–77, 478–86
- Calverton, V.F. 467, 726, 734, 782–83, 956, 965, 992
- Canada 25, 58–60, 69, 94, 110–11, 117, 125–27, 141, 304, 373, 760, 833
- Cannery and Agricultural Workers Union 759, 956
- Cannon, Carl (Cannon's son) 1, 181–87, 189, 1145
- Cannon, James Patrick [Jim], and
- Abern, Martin, relations with and
- cliquism 229, 231, 236–37, 276, 740–42, 748, 786, 827, 832, 850, 872, 875, 884–86, 895, 941, 943–44
- Allard, Gerry, relations with 115, 402, 407, 415, 416–17, 419–20, 429, 432, 434–37, 440–43, 445, 447–48, 450–51, 454–58, 460–61, 479–80, 837
- American Workers Party [AWP]/Musteites, fusion xiii, 710, 712, 721, 727, 730, 731–37, 742–45, 746–752, 772–73, 802, 947, 1146
- assessments of 9, 45, 98–99, 141, 193–200, 205, 226–27, 231–32, 254, 285–286, 399–402, 404, 446–47, 275, 290, 292–93, 592–94, 762, 790, 794–95, 844–45, 851, 897, 941, 943–45, 947, 978–980, 1001, 1034–39
- British Trotskyists 719–20, 1133–38

- Cannon, James Patrick [Jim], and (*cont.*)
 Brown, Bill, views of/funeral 537,
 1076
 burglarized residence, (1928) 78, 130
 Burnham, James, relations 736, 790,
 792, 796–97, 800, 806–08, 822–24, 837,
 847, 852, 853, 859, 867, 872, 874–768,
 879–82, 889–90, 894–97, 906, 911, 920,
 923–926, 932, 935, 937, 944, 946, 948,
 998–99, 1024, 1025, 1027, 1028–1031,
 1121–22, 1142
 Cannon Groups/factions 27, 63, 69, 99–
 100, 103, 115, 166, 172, 227, 238–39, 243,
 245, 247, 252, 254, 288, 291, 306, 313,
 329–30, 359, 397, 415, 438, 461, 762, 790,
 794–95, 821, 824, 829, 844–45
 cautious about aligning with Trotsky
 99–100, 208, 222, 256–57
 challenges to leadership/critique of
 “Cannon regime” 191–95, 200–201,
 207–10, 714–15, 779–80, 782, 785, 802–
 03
 character/ “merits of his defects” 200,
 205, 306, 655, 821, 836, 887, 944–45
 central figure in Communist League of
 America (Opposition) 97–99, 103–
 08, 110, 117, 193, 254–55
 Communist League of America (Oppos-
 ition), anti-Cannon factionalism
 226–27, 229–52, 276, 279, 283–84, 288–
 89, 295–300, 307–08, 437–38, 444–447,
 742
 Communist League of America (Oppos-
 ition), demands readmission to Com-
 munist Party 134, 137
 Communist League of America (Oppos-
 ition), internationalism and anti-
 Cannon factionalism 252–53, 256,
 267, 274–75, 277–80, 282–83, 286–89,
 294, 299–300, 302, 308, 448–49
 Communist League of America (Oppos-
 ition) launched 140–42
 Communist League of America (Oppos-
 ition), personal revival and realign-
 ment 254–56, 284–86, 291–8, 303–
 04, 306, 309–10, 315
 Corcoran, Patrick J., murder of 873,
 1052, 1056, 1058, 1062–63, 1067, 1071–
 72, 1073–75
 criticism of, organizational solutions to
 political problems (Leon Trotsky and
 others) 228–29, 242, 246, 283, 288–
 89, 305, 309, 782, 790, 802, 807–08, 821,
 824–25, 943, 1133, 1137, 1150
 demoralization & poverty during early
 Communist League of America
 (Opposition) “dog days” 1, 177–78,
 180–81, 186, 188, 194, 199–200, 206–08,
 313
 demoralization, political retreat, and
 early tensions with Abern, Glotzer,
 Shachtman, and Spector 192–
 05
 denounces violence on the left 75, 85,
 88–89
 domestic affairs/family relations 1–2,
 180–191, 211, 799–800, 1129, 1139, 1144–
 46
 Draper, Theodore 45
 Dunne, Vincent Ray, and Left Opposition
 publishing house 128
 Dunne, Vincent Ray, critique of *Northwest
 Organizer* 693–94
 Dunne, Vincent Ray, closeness 887
 Dunne, Vincent Ray, concerns with
 Cannon’s “dog days” retreat 205
 Dunne, Vincent Ray, gains in California
 1936–37, 906
 Dunne, Vincent Ray, farmer-laborism
 863–65
 Dunne, Vincent Ray, party-trade union
 relations 695
 Dunne, Vincent Ray, seeks documents on
 Oehler opposition 805
 Dunne, Vincent Ray, support during
 entry disagreements 892–93, 901,
 906
 Dunne, Vincent Ray, “truce talks” with
 Norman Thomas 910
 Dunne, William F., closeness to and break
 from (1928) 108–09, 167, 181
 Dunne, William F., critique (1934) 597–
 600
 expulsion from Communist Party, USA,
 and siding with Trotsky 4–5, 8, 51–
 56, 65–71, 100–102
 Farmer-Labor Party [FLP] 162, 335–337,
 863–65

- Cannon, James Patrick [Jim], and (*cont.*)
 Field, B.J., relations with (New York City Hotel Strike, 1933–34) 462–63, 476–77, 479, 481–86, 591, 736, 762–63
 French Turn 705–07, 710, 714, 716–17, 719, 721, 760, 763, 765–66, 770, 775–78, 791, 797, 801, 827, 832, 857, 943, 1077
 German crisis 294–99
 “gestation theory”/“proletarian kernel,” prepared in Workers (Communist) Party for International Left Opposition 99–101, 111, 228, 249, 330, 404
 Goldman, Al, relations with 649–50, 652, 670–71, 773–75, 839–40, 853, 859–60, 873–74, 881, 886, 888–89, 892, 899, 906, 1019, 1125
 Gordon, Sam, relations with 80, 187–88, 196, 226, 232, 237, 243, 282, 285–86, 288, 396, 465, 530, 596, 797, 819, 834, 1146–47
 Gould, Nathan 252, 254, 443, 801, 843–44, 847, 892, 1136–37, 1139
 historiography of United States communism xiv–xvi, 10, 43–50
 health problems 799, 805, 809, 859, 871, 873, 887, 903, 912
 Howat, Alexander 419–20
 homosexuality 396–97, 797
 in Europe 714–17, 1139–41
 internal party educationals/bulletins 211, 248, 384, 433–34
 Karsner, Rose, relationship with xvi, 1, 56, 101–02, 181–191, 205–06, 306, 427, 456, 491, 799, 855, 904, 956, 970, 1144–46, 1152
Labor Action [1936–37] 888, 891–96, 898–99, 903, 907–08, 918–19, 970, 1018, 1020, 1043, 1045–46, 1048–49
 labor defense 3–4, 76, 98, 166–68, 185, 188, 291, 293, 313, 392–407, 411–14, 435–36, 491–93, 734, 759, 761, 956, 1034
 labor party 141, 313, 326–36, 837, 900, 1124
 “Letters to dere emily” 560–61, 629, 630, 640–41, 651, 658–59, 665, 809
 libel suit against Communist Party, Minneapolis 1938, 1073–75, 1099
 Lovestone, Jay, debate 494
 Lovestone, Jay (Right Opposition), rejects bloc 218
 Lundeborg, Harry (Sailors’ Union of the Pacific/Maritime Federation of the Pacific) 883–84, 886–87, 898, 907, 998, 1034–1052
 mass work 213, 215–19, 291, 309–310, 378–379, 397, 414, 417, 429, 438, 443, 448–49, 695, 715, 801, 870, 876, 887, 900, 906–07, 942–43, 970, 1039, 1049
 mayoralty candidate, New York 1937, 932
 meaning of Minneapolis 596, 610–12, 692–94, 742
Militant publication schedule 206–08
 Militant Group/Clarity Group, Socialist Party of America groups, negotiations/relations with and critiques of 764, 768, 777, 799, 801, 831–32, 837, 852–54, 856–57, 859, 867, 867–69, 871, 876–79, 882, 890, 892–94, 899–900, 908, 910, 914–15, 917–918, 921, 924–26, 928, 930, 1013–14, 1021, 1023–24, 1027, 1029–30, 1033, 1117, 1119
 Minneapolis teamsters 588–89, 591–96, 597, 599–600, 604–06, 610–12, 624, 627, 629–30, 633, 640–41, 647–51, 658–59, 662–65, 671, 675–76, 677–79, 692–94, 711, 742, 761, 781, 817, 873, 1051–52, 1056, 1062, 1070, 1073–75, 1077, 1099, 1128, 1147, 1151
 Muste, A.J., views of/relations with 409, 412, 442, 478, 513, 727–28, 744–45, 748, 750, 760, 762–63, 776–77, 779, 781, 784–85, 789–90, 792–93, 803–09, 814, 821–23, 832, 841–43, 845–46, 851, 876, 882, 956, 1019, 1146
 “Negro Question,” also Black Belt Nation thesis xiii, 313, 338, 340, 342, 344–46, 351–55, 362–63, 754, 756
 Oehler, Hugo, views of/working relations prior to AWP fusion 92, 165–68, 201, 214, 232, 235, 245–46, 252, 276, 285, 291, 330, 394, 403, 433, 435–36, 439–40, 450, 455, 473–74, 476–77, 480–81, 484–86, 512, 624, 731, 739, 796–97

- Cannon, James Patrick [Jim], and (*cont.*)
 Oehler, Hugo/Oehlerites, worsening
 relations and eventual split around
 sectarianism, AWP fusion, and entry-
 ism xiii, 706, 712, 714, 719, 735, 740,
 742, 755, 765, 770–74, 779–95, 798–99,
 801–812, 814, 823–24, 833, 848
The Organizer [1934] 624–25
 proletarian vs. petty-bourgeois
 members 227–28, 407, 461, 835–
 836
 Red Army 293–300, 308, 312, 444
 revolutionary press, importance & policy
 129–30, 178, 206–08, 210, 384, 749, 888–
 89, 891, 893, 895, 898–903, 907–09, 919,
 920–22, 962, 1022, 1043, 1045, 1049
 Shachtman, Max, alliances with 225–
 26, 302, 648–51, 706–07, 711–12, 721,
 731–39, 749, 761–63, 786, 799–803, 805–
 08, 828–33, 838–42, 844, 846, 868–69,
 9261014, 1121–22
 Shachtman, Max, rebuked by Trotsky on
 international work 263–65, 269–75,
 279–81, 283, 299–300
 Shachtman, Max, rebuked by Trotsky on
 Socialist Party Convention 1937, 915–
 17, 926–27, 946, 1012
 Sixth Congress (1928), Foster-Cannon
 caucus, and aftermath 59–67
 Smith Act prosecutions 21–22, 261, 1151
 Socialist Party of America, entry xiii,
 487, 735, 764–65, 769, 776–78, 792–
 93, 799, 801, 812, 814, 823–47, 852–53,
 855–61, 866–72, 876–947, 970, 1010–12,
 1046–47, 1080, 1118, 1120, 1145–47
 speeches/public forums 5, 76–77, 79,
 82–85, 134, 142, 192, 201, 210–11, 213, 277,
 294–96, 303–04, 313, 353–54, 384, 405,
 408, 412, 414, 442, 468, 470–71, 476, 478,
 605, 679, 691, 693, 718, 720–21, 727, 752,
 760–61, 794–95, 809, 817, 819, 878, 880,
 882–83, 1050
 speeches disrupted (gangsterism/hoo-
 liganism & Workers' Defense Guards)
 5, 76–77, 79–80, 82–85, 88
 Spector, Maurice, relations with 57–60,
 69, 71, 73, 89, 101, 111–12, 126–28, 130,
 140, 143, 192, 196–97, 199, 202–03, 231,
 242, 251, 257, 274, 278–79, 309, 438, 706,
 711–712, 714, 731, 762, 765, 829, 845, 889,
 947
 Stamm, Tom, relations with 226–27, 237,
 394–97, 402, 755–57, 765, 779, 782–83,
 787–89, 791–92, 796–97, 802, 809, 811–
 12, 943, 948, 1146, 1148
 Swabeck, Arne, concerns and criticisms
 205, 741–42
 Swabeck, Arne, praised 286
 Swabeck, Arne, tensions over Socialist
 Party entry 880–83, 887, 890
 testing Trotsky on B.J. Field 464–466
 trade union work 45–46, 110, 136–37,
 140–41, 143, 161, 163–64, 166–67, 201,
 204–05, 214, 219, 292–93, 336, 353–54,
 379, 384–89, 407–09, 411–15, 419–20,
 426–27, 430–32, 435–37, 439–43, 447,
 450–51, 462, 475, 477–78, 482, 508–09,
 554, 560, 595–602, 604–05, 611–12, 616,
 692–96, 750, 781, 817, 863, 883–84, 907,
 939, 941, 1036, 1039–52, 1056, 1062–67,
 1070, 1072–74, 1077, 1088–1090, 1092,
 1095, 1097–1100, 1123, 1127, 1147
 Tresca, Carlo, relations with 79, 411–12,
 491–92, 734, 956, 963, 998, 1031
 Trotsky, Leon, American adherents rela-
 tions with 208, 210, 256–57, 288,
 298–99, 308, 419, 447–449, 463–467,
 705–706, 710–12, 715, 732, 765, 813, 827–
 33, 847, 917–18, 933, 938, 947, 954, 962,
 968, 970–71, 977, 998, 1001, 1006, 1010–
 14, 1022, 1118, 1128–1130, 1132–33, 1139,
 1142–44
 Trotsky, Leon, contribution to United
 States communism 162, 326
 Trotsky, Leon, positive assessment/trust
 of Cannon 299–300, 715, 717, 968–70,
 1129–30, 1133, 1135, 1140
 Trotsky, Leon, *Transitional Program* (1938)
 xvi, 336, 604, 1124, 1128, 1137, 1140
 Trotskyist “Club,” Socialist Party, forma-
 tion and subsequent disagreements
 740, 849–50, 867, 871–72, 872–83, 886–
 99, 901, 903–04, 906, 908, 911, 917, 921,
 921–27, 941, 1020–21
 unemployed work 8, 297, 384–92, 786–
 87
 Weisbord, Albert, relations with 214–
 221, 223, 225–26, 256, 461, 464

- Cannon, James Patrick [Jim], and (*cont.*)
 Women's Auxiliaries 426–427, 559, 561,
 564–65, 630
 Wright, John G. [Joseph Vanzler/Usick],
 relations 887, 892–93, 899, 911–13,
 921
 youth, relations/training/criticisms xiii,
 2, 98–99, 177–78, 226–38, 244, 248–49,
 252, 255, 285–86, 313, 395–96, 404, 716,
 765, 769, 773, 791, 794, 797, 801, 803,
 814, 825–26, 831, 833–834, 842–44, 856,
 877–78, 930, 934, 939, 1078, 1117, 1120,
 1140, 1146–47, 1152
- Cannon, Ruth (Cannon's daughter) 1, 156,
 181–90, 1145
- Capelis, Herbert 350
- Carlson, Gilbert 1055
- Carter, Joseph [Joseph Friedman/Carter
 Group] 233–34, 237, 241, 246, 248–49,
 251–52, 254, 270, 282, 285, 288–89, 329–
 30, 333, 769, 814, 837, 852, 880, 889,
 892–94, 917–26, 971, 975, 1014, 1021–22,
 1024–27, 1122
- Catalonia (Spanish Civil War) 1017, 1023,
 1028–1029
- centrism 390, 396, 419, 720, 733, 738, 741,
 767, 770, 801, 803, 806, 814, 823, 826,
 915, 942
- Chicago 2, 23–24, 27–31, 72, 82, 85–87, 92–
 93, 98, 103–05, 118–20, 129, 138, 139,
 141–42, 158, 177–78, 180, 188, 194, 198–
 99, 206, 208–09, 223, 229–30, 233,
 235–36, 240, 244–45, 246, 258, 285,
 292, 293–94, 302, 315, 323, 328, 346, 383,
 391, 393–94, 401–06, 415–16, 433, 439,
 443, 452–53, 456–57, 529, 584, 589, 605,
 613–14, 626, 713, 735, 737, 744–45, 748,
 760, 762, 768, 773, 783, 785, 790, 802,
 806, 812–13, 829, 833, 838–43, 852–53,
 863, 872–74, 877–78, 880–82, 886–89,
 892, 897, 901, 904, 909, 910, 920, 926,
 931–33, 939, 962, 966–67, 974, 981, 1005,
 1008, 1027, 1033, 1059, 1064, 1078, 1086,
 1118, 1120
- China xii, 39, 52, 67, 126–27, 158, 162, 172, 221
- Citizens' Alliance 522–23, 527–28, 569–72,
 575–76, 591–92, 601–08, 626, 644, 656–
 57, 660–61, 664–65, 672–73, 675–77
- Clarity Group, Socialist Party [Clarityites]
 908, 913–14, 921, 924–26, 928–31, 934,
 937, 1008, 1013–14, 1021, 1023, 1028–29,
 1117
- Clarke, George 226, 237–38, 243–44, 395,
 430–32, 437, 439, 452, 791, 797, 806,
 911–12, 920, 926, 1077–90, 1094, 1098,
 1114, 1147
- class collaboration 44, 337, 419, 556–57,
 598, 700, 704, 724, 862, 905, 1028, 1123
- Clement, Travers 886, 1008, 1102, 1119
- coal fields, (Illinois, Kansas, Pennsylvania,
 etc) 27, 160, 162, 273, 292–93, 395, 371,
 403, 410, 414–426, 429–30, 433, 435–
 437, 439, 440, 443–44, 451–57, 461, 512,
 776
- Cochran, Bert [Burke/Burt/E.R. Frank] 806,
 818, 834, 836–37, 841–42, 903, 1077–90,
 1092–98, 1119, 1121, 1145, 1147
- Cochran, Joseph R. [Citizens' Alliance/Em-
 ployers' Advisory Council] 620, 641–42,
 644, 659, 662, 665
- Cohen, Larry 726, 732, 746, 824
- Communist International [Comintern] i,
 xii, xiv, 3, 6, 12, 14–64, 66, 70–71, 87,
 91–93, 96, 100–103, 106, 125, 130–131,
 170–172, 174–76, 109, 113, 119, 122, 124–
 25, 130–31, 134, 136, 139, 171–72, 174–76,
 203, 208, 215–16, 218, 230, 285, 295, 300,
 301, 304, 310–11, 314, 325, 329, 334, 338–
 44, 346, 359, 362–63, 376, 381–82, 391,
 400, 418, 494, 591, 697–700, 730, 764,
 780, 804, 819, 831, 871, 884, 902, 909,
 952, 955, 969, 984, 988, 989, 1022, 1119,
 1137, 1147–48
- Communist League of America (Opposition)
 [CLA/The League/American Left Opposi-
 tion] xi, 2, 5, 9, 29, 31–33, 48, 51, 57–
 58, 66–74, 76, 79–99, 102–22, 125–43,
 157, 162, 165, 176–79, 192, 194–95, 200,
 204–228, 237–65, 267–75, 277–80, 283–
 87, 289–95, 300–31, 336, 339, 346–47,
 349, 350–51, 354–55, 359–60, 363, 365,
 375–79, 383, 385–87, 390–91, 394–405,
 407–08, 411–22, 426–39, 441–46, 448,
 450–95, 513, 521, 525–26, 528–30, 539,
 546, 549, 552, 554, 557–58, 575, 579,
 590–91, 593, 595–96, 601–06, 613, 650,
 652, 670, 706–10, 713–14, 718–22, 731–

- 38, 742–51, 760, 764–72, 774, 777, 783,
791–92, 797, 802, 884, 900, 948, 953–55,
1052
- Communist League of Struggle [CLS]/*Class
Struggle* [1931–35], see also Albert Weis-
bord 220–25, 428
- Communist Party, Canada [CPC] 57–58,
110–14
- Communist Party, France [PCF] 699, 701,
704
- Communist Party, USA [CP] xii–xiv, 2, 6,
8, 11, 13–14, 20–27, 30–35, 42, 44–46,
51, 79, 81, 86–99, 106, 109–10, 115–18,
122, 133, 141, 157–58, 162, 164–170, 172,
174–75, 177, 187, 201, 203–04, 214–15,
218–21, 262, 291, 294, 297, 305, 310, 324,
326–330, 334–35, 339, 347–52, 363,
371, 376–77, 379–88, 391–95, 398–99,
406–10, 422, 427–430, 440, 442, 451–
56, 467–68, 488–90, 494, 508, 513, 515,
524–26, 528–29, 537, 548–551, 588, 591,
595–597, 600–01, 606, 614–15, 623,
631, 661, 669, 693, 718, 722, 724, 726,
728, 730, 735, 743, 744–45, 753, 756–
57, 759, 764–69, 773, 780, 815, 818–19,
822, 831, 833, 864–65, 884, 900, 905–
08, 911, 928–29, 931, 935, 941–42, 944,
951, 954–55, 958, 960, 962–63, 969–70,
974, 980, 989, 992, 996, 1002, 1004–05,
1014, 1018–19, 1023, 1034, 1036–37, 1041,
1043–53, 1060–64, 1066–80, 1092, 1095,
1097–99, 1125–28, 1131, 1152
- Conference on Progressive Labor Action
[CPLA] 6, 381, 398, 401, 409, 416, 422,
433, 442, 445, 451, 456, 459, 512, 720,
722, 724–25, 727–33, 746, 751–52, 757,
806, 808
- Congress of Industrial Organizations [CIO]
xii, 30, 44, 47, 176, 316, 319, 321–22,
336, 521, 695–96, 815, 846, 898, 900,
918, 920, 951, 1034, 1042, 1050–51, 1056,
1059–60, 1062, 1064–71, 1073, 1076–77,
1079–80, 1097, 1119, 1123, 1125, 1127, 1131
- company unions 316–17, 518, 535, 551, 556,
597, 676, 751
- Cope, Elmer 726
- Cope, Esther 726
- Corcoran, Patrick J. 1052–53, 1055–58, 1061–
63, 1065–69, 1071–72, 1074–76
- Cowl, Carl 97, 105, 107, 123, 200, 244, 285,
526, 784
- Cramer, Robley D. [Bob] 554–55, 590, 638,
657, 1069
- Curtiss, Charles 834, 842, 855, 883, 894,
897–99, 1129, 1132
- Daily Worker* 21–22, 53, 74, 77–78, 81–82, 87,
95, 98, 102, 117, 132, 297, 385, 406, 489,
597, 724, 928, 969, 1020, 1063, 1064,
1068, 1070, 1073–75, 1127
- DeBoer, Harry 536–37, 543, 558, 626, 632,
635, 637, 817
- DeBoer, Pauline 562
- Delson, Max 837, 875, 878, 908
- Democratic Party 47, 316, 321, 323, 335, 430,
524, 570, 765, 900, 1092
- Denby, Charles 378
- Deutscher, Isaac 19, 56, 261, 1140
- Dewar, Hugo 1134
- Dewey, John xii, 40, 951–52, 960, 963–66,
975–76, 978–81, 984–85, 988, 991, 993–
95, 998–99, 1003–06, 1009–12, 1036,
1069, 1126, 1167–68
- Dewey Commission/Hearings/Commission
of Inquiry into the Charges Made Against
Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials (Mex-
ico) 981, 991–992, 994, 1005, 1009–13,
1027, 1034, 1110–14
- Dobbs, Farrell 527, 534–37, 545–46, 551–
52, 557, 559, 563, 567–76, 580, 583, 588,
592–93, 597, 601–04, 612–17, 623–30,
637–38, 642, 652–57, 667, 669, 674–75,
817, 1054–65, 1063–65, 1068, 1073–74,
1076, 1125, 1129–30
- Dobbs, Marvel Scholl 559–60, 566, 578, 583,
614, 616, 640, 1054
- Draper, Hal 896, 932, 938, 948, 1033, 1118
- Draper, Theodore 10, 44–45, 101
- Dressmakers' strike (New York) 408
- Dubinsky, David 322, 335, 981
- Dunne, Bill [William F.] 61, 63–64, 80, 108–
10, 165–67, 181, 191, 345, 597–98, 600,
606, 625
- Dunne, Grant 504, 525, 534, 537, 546, 551,
559, 574, 576, 584, 592, 622, 596–98,
604, 614, 622–24, 637–38, 654, 657, 662,
1057–58, 1060–61, 1068–69, 1073–76,
1097

- Dunne, Clara Holmes 560–62, 578
- Dunne, Miles [Mick/Micky] 501, 504, 525, 530, 537, 541, 544, 551, 555–56, 558–59, 568, 615, 621–24, 654, 664, 759, 517, 576, 584, 596–98, 604, 614, 622, 637–38, 654, 659, 662, 664, 669, 759, 817, 1060–61, 1056–58, 1060–61, 1068–69, 1073–76, 1097
- Dunne, Vincent Ray [V.R./Ray/Vince] xvi, 89, 106, 108, 128, 131, 141–42, 152–53, 157, 191, 205, 209, 212, 217, 219, 223, 225, 235–39, 242, 256, 259, 286, 335–37, 404, 415, 417, 501, 504, 524–26, 529–39, 542–46, 549, 551–52, 554–56, 558–59, 567, 569, 589, 572, 576, 584, 592, 596–98, 604, 614, 621–24, 626, 629–630, 637–38, 647–48, 652–54, 656, 659, 662–63, 665, 667–68, 670, 674–75, 693–94, 706, 750, 773, 781, 785, 798, 805, 817, 821–23, 828, 834–36, 841–43, 852, 858, 862–67, 888, 892–902, 906, 911–914, 920, 930, 957, 977, 1027, 1051–53, 1057–58, 1060–64, 1068–69, 1071–76, 1081, 1086, 1097, 1120, 1129, 1130, 1146, 1151
- Dunnigan, Eugene H. 616–17, 627, 635, 641, 643, 661–63, 667–69, 672
- Edwards, John 199, 233, 275, 285, 328, 433, 443, 450, 613, 735, 742, 785, 839
- Eiffel, Paul [Paul Kirchoff] 771–72, 791, 804
- Electric Auto-Lite Strike (Toledo, 1934) 511–516, 518, 521, 555, 590, 597, 606, 611, 691, 693, 696, 721, 728, 742, 749–50, 752
- Entryism/entrism (see also French turn) 701–3, 707–13, 715–23, 739–41, 773–79, 797–99, 812–14, 823–40, 847–52, 855, 863–67, 868–73, 875–78, 881, 897–99, 909–10, 913–14, 917–18, 920, 923–24, 930, 933–43, 948, 1009–12, 1015, 1039
- Erber, Ernest 774, 1017, 1033
- factionalism xiii, 23, 55, 58, 106, 116, 137, 175, 176, 181, 191, 236, 239–40, 247, 250, 253–57, 262–63, 265, 270–71, 306–7, 313, 323, 332, 342, 349, 363, 384, 396–97, 402, 437, 440, 443–44, 529, 596, 603, 697, 711–16, 740, 744, 747, 761–63, 784–85, 787, 797, 804–808, 822, 830, 841–842, 845, 849, 936, 947, 957, 1035, 1037, 1093, 1152
- Farmer-Labor Party/farmer-laborism [FLP], see also Floyd B. Olson 90, 126, 142, 162–63, 213, 321, 324–25, 331–32, 334–38, 402, 405, 523, 525, 531, 548, 550, 598, 603–04, 610, 615, 638, 655, 659, 671, 860–66, 900, 1028, 1065
- Farmers' Holiday Association 555, 610, 615
- Farrell, James T. 958–62, 973, 978, 980, 982–83, 988, 1113
- Farrington, Frank 416, 420
- fascism xii, 7, 20–21, 39, 92, 170, 173, 221, 294–95, 297, 299, 300–05, 310, 323, 354–55, 383, 391, 489–91, 634, 697–98, 700, 721, 741, 761, 826, 831, 849, 918, 950–52, 954, 1005, 1016–18, 1020, 1022–23, 1028, 1031, 1128, 1131, 1149
- Faue, Elizabeth 562–63, 616
- Federal Labor Unions 513, 693
- Federal Workers Section, Local 574 [FWS] 905, 1053
- Field, B.J. [Max Gould] 460–87, 591, 735–36, 762, 1136
- Field, Esther 462–63, 468, 474, 484
- Fiorotto brothers, Al/Eddie 1057–58, 1062, 1068, 1073
- Fishwick, Harry 416
- Food Workers Industrial Union [FWIU] 467–70, 473–74, 480, 485, 487, 780
- Foster, William Z. 4–5, 24, 46, 51, 59–61, 63, 103, 170, 175, 353, 384, 415, 417, 419, 535, 723–24, 780, 1084
- Fourth International xii–xvi, 10, 47, 139, 300–03, 376–78, 458–59, 611–12, 649–50, 679–80, 704–05, 707–09, 715–16, 718–19, 721, 734, 736–37, 740–41, 748–51, 763, 765, 771, 791, 801, 805, 809–10, 813–14, 816, 822, 826, 829, 831–32, 837, 844, 848, 856, 871, 874–76, 893, 916, 925, 933, 942, 945, 947, 972, 1006, 1100, 1116, 1120, 1125, 1128–29, 1132–49
- Frank, Pierre 270–72, 463, 716
- Frank, Waldo 467, 970–71
- Frankel, Jan 265, 463, 982, 984, 994
- French turn (see also entryism) xviii, 697, 705–722, 732, 749, 760, 763–766, 770–85, 790–91, 797, 801–13, 819–21, 823,

- 827, 832, 848-49, 857, 867, 933, 943,
1011, 1077, 1137
- Frosig, George 501, 538, 541, 1055
- gangsterism/hooliganism 5, 57, 72-73, 75-
76, 78, 80-82, 86-87, 90-94, 97, 116, 121,
126, 143, 161, 223, 391, 486, 489, 491-494,
804, 1027, 1057-76
- Gastonia (Loray Mill strike, 1929) 164-69,
173, 201, 211, 214, 224, 1126
- Geltman, Emanuel/Manny [Garrett] 227,
233, 405, 407, 777, 791, 832, 844, 1118,
1139
- Geltman, Max [M. Glee] 707, 722, 1054
- General Drivers' Union [Local 574/544]
509, 526-47, 551-66, 569-71, 575-677,
692-96, 817, 862, 864, 866, 872-73, 905,
1052-58, 1060-64, 1066-76, 1093, 1151
- Gebert, B.K./Bill [Boleslaw Konstanty] 30-
32
- Gillespie, Illinois (Conference/Convention)
188, 292, 424, 429, 432-33, 437, 439,
441-459, 461, 843
- Giganti, Joe 29-30, 367
- Giovannitti, Arturo 478
- Gitlow, Benjamin 36, 64, 73-74, 77, 85, 332,
411-12, 468, 473, 478, 482, 487, 742, 771,
1171
- Glotzer, Albert 2, 27-29, 72, 80-81, 92, 98,
102-05, 107-09, 118, 129, 141, 150, 153,
167, 178-80, 186, 193-201, 206-09, 222,
228-93, 302-04, 306, 308-09, 314, 328,
330, 333-37, 340, 346, 362-64, 366-
67, 397, 399-401, 403-04, 429, 431, 433,
435, 437, 443-45, 449, 450-52, 456-60,
529-30, 706-07, 712-15, 719-22, 731-32,
737-38, 740, 742, 762, 765, 772-73, 785,
790, 796-97, 800-06, 810, 827-30, 838-
47, 855-56, 870, 879, 890-92, 903, 906,
909, 927, 966, 981, 984, 988, 992, 994,
1027, 1111, 1113, 1148-50
- Goldfield, Michael xvii, 31, 171, 317, 350, 375,
379, 518, 695, 743, 936, 1043
- Goldman, Albert [Morrison/Verblin] 23-
24, 400-401, 504, 614, 626, 640,
649-50, 652-53, 664, 670-71, 772-75,
839-40, 873-75, 812, 828, 845, 853, 856,
859-60, 866, 873-74, 881-82, 886-89,
892-93, 898-99, 903-6, 909, 914, 931,
962, 981, 983-87, 1000, 1017-20, 1034,
1039, 1074, 1121, 1125
- Gomez, Manuel [Charles Shipman] 66,
69-70, 81
- Gordon, James 480-82, 486-87
- Gordon, Sam 80, 92, 186-188, 196, 200, 203,
226, 232, 237-38, 243-44, 246, 282,
285-88, 289, 396, 465, 530, 596, 791,
797, 819, 828, 834, 1146
- Gourget, Pierre 261-62, 265, 267, 269, 278
- Grant, Ted 1133
- Great Depression 6-8, 158, 160, 315, 318,
320, 348, 352, 375, 379, 381, 385, 508,
525, 528
- Groves, Reg 719-20, 1133-34, 1136
- Guttringer, Pauline 73, 121, 161
- Hall, Cliff 536, 544-45, 557-58, 560, 593,
624, 1053
- Hansen, Joe 199, 550, 740-41, 785-86, 804,
828, 832, 834, 836-37, 842, 884-86, 890,
896, 913, 941-45, 978, 1037-38, 1045,
1146, 1172
- Hansen, Reba 842
- Hardman, J.B.S. [Benjamin Salutsky] 726,
729, 734, 736, 744, 747
- Harlem 122, 352, 365, 754-57, 759, 798,
1143
- Harris, Myrtle 615-16
- Hathaway, Clarence 27-28, 61, 64-65, 69,
103-4, 106, 109, 111, 339, 385, 387, 391,
489, 1165
- Haywood, Harry 344, 350, 352, 379
- Haynes, John Earl 10-12, 35
- Henson, Francis 778, 798
- Herberg, Will 359, 810
- Hillman, Sidney 321-22, 335, 384, 723
- Hippodrome meeting 966-67, 976-77, 1009
- Holstein, Happy 585, 750
- Hook, Sidney 466, 492, 494, 726, 729, 741,
776, 868, 955, 960, 978, 991, 1011
- Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union (New
York Strike, 1933-1934) 414, 468-92, 494,
611, 590-91, 712, 733, 739, 759, 761
- Howe, Irving 937
- Hudson, Carlos 614, 669
- Hungarians 62, 73, 80, 87-89, 116-21, 130,
161, 779

- Illinois Women's Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners of America 425–27, 435, 559–63, 565, 567, 569, 576, 578, 615–16, 626, 635–36, 640, 650, 653, 659
- Independent Labour Party [ILP] 272, 719–20, 953, 969, 1012, 1133–37
- Independent Tidewater Boatmen's Union [ITBU] 411–14
- Independent Workmen's Circle 133
- Industrial Workers of the World [IWW/Wobblies] xiv, 3–4, 79, 83–86, 88, 90, 105–06, 111, 116, 129, 140, 166, 209–10, 215, 227, 229, 392, 396, 398, 412, 422, 469, 472, 478, 521, 523, 531, 535–36, 591, 655, 759, 761, 796, 882–83, 908, 941, 1034–36, 1038–39, 1042, 1079, 1082, 1152
- International Brotherhood of Teamsters Union [IBT/IBTU] 509, 536, 538, 541, 545, 552, 557–58, 560, 608, 618, 692, 694, 822, 862, 872–73, 1051, 1053, 1056–57, 1059–60, 1062, 1064, 1151–52
- International Communist League [ICL] 698, 701, 711, 714–15, 717, 719, 731–32, 749, 800, 806–07, 827, 830, 847
- internationalism xv, 3–4, 7, 55, 257, 277, 279, 301, 304, 308–9, 312, 729–30, 736, 745, 748, 750, 802, 804, 812, 814, 848, 1015
- International Labor Defense [ILD] 4, 29, 53, 65, 68, 76, 94, 98, 100, 115, 166, 168, 187, 291, 349–50, 367, 392–93, 411, 413, 526, 596, 759, 954
- International Ladies Garment Workers Union [ILGWU] 122, 322, 723, 981
- International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union [ILWU]/International Longshoremen's Association [ILA]/longshoremen 509–11, 518, 606, 884, 886, 1034, 1036, 1041–44, 1051, 1068–69, 1127
- International Left Opposition [ILO] xi–xiii, 2, 4, 6, 99, 122, 124, 126, 140, 142, 158, 216–17, 220–22, 228, 239–40, 242, 250–51, 253–54, 256, 260–78, 280, 282–83, 286–87, 289–90, 294–95, 297, 300, 302, 308–10, 314, 323, 347, 360, 392, 411, 443, 447, 449, 458, 463–64, 466, 494, 697, 1023
- International Workers Order [IWO] 30–31, 393, 398
- Inter-Racial Club 798
- Isaacs, Harold 844–45, 848, 960, 966, 969, 997
- Jacobs, Paul 96–98, 397
- Jacobson, Julius 937–938
- James, Cyril Lionel Robert [C.L.R./J.R. Johnson] 378, 1133–36, 1143
- Jersey City, New Jersey 1131
- Jewish Group, Ligue Communiste (France) 261, 265, 272–73, 279, 281, 301
- Johannes, Mike (Police Chief, Minneapolis) 571, 575, 578, 584, 606, 621, 628–30, 635–36, 638, 641–42, 646, 649, 658
- Johnson, Arnold 726, 819–20, 843, 1075
- Kahlo, Frida 953, 963, 984, 995–96, 1112
- Kansas City, Kansas 53, 104–05, 165–66, 184, 188–89, 243, 257, 306, 376, 397, 404–05, 414, 531, 754–55, 796, 933, 1059, 1064, 1121, 1129
- Karsner, David 182
- Karsner, Rose Greenberg/Greenburg xvi, 1, 3, 56, 78, 101–03, 108, 121, 145, 181–97, 202, 205, 207, 211–12, 232, 240, 280, 306, 395, 411, 443, 456, 491, 734, 740, 799, 827, 832, 855, 858–59, 872–74, 887, 897, 899, 904, 956, 970, 1129, 1139, 1140, 1144–46, 1152
- Kirchwey, Freda 958–60, 1007
- Klehr, Harvey 10–12, 16, 46, 382
- Kluckholm, Frank 959, 997
- Konikow, Antoinette 69, 82, 119, 123–25, 243, 284, 735, 835–36, 1142
- Korth, Philip A. 592
- Krehm, William 93, 280–81, 487–88, 736
- Labor Action* [1936–37] 687–88, 888–903, 907–09, 918–22, 914, 925, 938, 945, 962, 967, 970, 1018, 1020, 1027, 1043, 1045–46, 1048–49, 1078, 1081, 1117
- Labor Age* (see also Brookwood Labor College) 163, 723, 724, 727, 729
- Labor Non-Partisan League 323, 905, 1091
- Labor Party/labor party perspective 142, 313–14, 321–22, 323–24, 326–37, 602–04, 772, 837, 840, 862–63, 866, 877, 881, 900, 910, 1124, 1134

- LaFollette, Robert M. 162, 323, 325, 602, 604, 724, 1091–92
- LaFollette, Suzanne 952, 960–61, 969, 973–74, 976–77, 981–82, 994–95, 998–1002, 1006, 1008, 1012
- Laguardia, Fiorello 920
- Landau, Kurt 261–65, 266, 268–69, 270–74, 277–78, 1006
- Lasky, Marjorie Penn 562–63
- League Against War and Fascism 831
- League for a Revolutionary Workers Party [LRWP], see also B.J. Field/Fieldites 487, 798
- leadership 70–72, 202, 234–36, 481–82, 514, 593–95, 616–17, 619, 622–23, 677–79, 704–5, 819–20, 843–45, 912–14, 1150–51
- Le Blanc, Paul xvii, 18–19
- Lenin, Vladimir Ilich xv, 4, 16–19, 36–38, 61–62, 140, 338, 341, 384, 730, 817
- Leninbund (Hugo Urbahns) 6, 59, 69, 140, 260–61, 267
- Leninism 6, 11–12, 15–17, 30, 35–36, 43, 52, 54, 106, 113, 135–36, 140, 218–19, 344, 347, 360, 428, 956
- Lenin School (Moscow) 25, 27–28, 64–65, 104, 111–13, 599, 780–81
- Le Sueur, Meridel 520–21, 579, 581, 633
- Lewis, John L. 86, 115, 161, 318, 321–22, 335, 402, 415–16, 418–22, 425, 440, 458, 521, 695, 846, 1070, 1080, 1082, 1096–97
- Lewis, Meyer 1053, 1068
- Lewit, Morris [Stein] 132, 154, 177, 205, 211, 242–43, 433, 723, 732, 737–38, 791, 798, 835, 837, 845, 869, 911–12
- libel 1073–75, 1099
- liberals 166, 361, 726, 952, 960, 969–70, 972–73, 976, 993–94, 997, 1000, 1006, 1008, 1010–11, 1015
- Ligue Communiste (Opposition) [French League], see also French turn 260–62, 265–68, 270, 273, 275–78, 282, 287, 697–98, 702, 707–09, 714–717, 770
- Lovell, Frank [Frederick Lang] xvii, 1034–37
- Lovell, Sarah 948
- Lovestone, Jay 5, 27–28, 51, 59–72, 74–75, 77–79, 83–84, 86, 96, 99–100, 103–04, 106–7, 111, 115–16, 119, 123–24, 130–32, 134, 135, 137–38, 161, 163, 168, 174–76, 181, 196, 203, 224, 342, 352, 415, 468, 494–95, 743, 765–67, 769, 798, 877, 1180
- Lovestoneites/Communist Party (Opposition)/Right Opposition 27, 83, 175–76, 214, 216–18, 221, 234, 268, 272, 296, 329, 332–33, 359, 384, 398–99, 403–04, 411–12, 468, 482, 486–87, 743, 745, 764–66, 768–69, 794, 798, 810, 822, 825–26, 831, 837, 853, 875, 908, 931, 935, 942, 945, 974, 1085, 1089, 1093–96, 1119, 1131
- Lundeberg, Harry 884, 886–87, 898, 907, 998, 1034–44, 1042–46, 1051, 1107
- Lyman, C. Arthur 581–82, 585, 589
- Malkin, Maurice L. 76–77, 117, 142, 185, 211
- Maloney, Shaun [Jack] 534, 536–38, 543, 575, 580, 588, 593, 642
- Marine Workers Defense Committee 412
- Maritime Federation of the Pacific 884, 898, 907, 918, 998, 1034–35, 1037, 1042–43, 1048, 1050
- Marxist Group (see also C.L.R. James and Ted Grant) 1133–34, 1136
- Marxist League [Communist League] (see also Reg Groves) 1134
- Marxist Workers' Party of Unification [POUM] 21, 909, 1016–1032, 1036, 1125
- mass organizations 143, 255, 261, 330, 491, 509, 696, 794, 1047, 1081, 1086, 1126, 1131
- Matthews, J.B., see also Revolutionary Policy Committee [RPC] 766–67
- Mayes, Barney [Mass/Moss] 884, 1025, 1037–38
- McDonald, John 812, 956, 982, 1113
- McKinney, Ernest Rice 726, 757, 778, 790, 798, 818, 819, 820, 827, 931, 1118
- militancy 6, 41, 116, 159, 163, 171, 307, 318, 322, 364, 409, 414, 418, 419, 425–26, 429, 431, 442, 456, 479, 481, 483, 485, 507, 512, 516, 521, 544, 549, 556, 570, 594, 612, 618, 677–78, 691, 694, 700, 742, 749, 758, 764, 900, 908, 920, 1004, 1039, 1041–44, 1085, 1088, 1096–97, 1119, 1123, 1147, 1151
- Militant/New Militant/Weekly Militant* [1928–34, 1935–36] 71–73, 78, 80, 112, 117, 125, 129–36, 169, 202, 206–12, 273, 280, 294, 329, 333, 380, 384, 387, 391, 395–96, 400, 402–05, 409–10, 422, 425, 430, 444, 446, 468, 480–85, 490, 492, 526,

- Militant/New Militant/Weekly Militant* [1928–34, 1935–36] (*cont.*) 530, 539, 569, 571, 588, 606, 681–84, 749, 753–54, 757–58, 772, 774, 780, 795, 797, 807, 809, 811, 815, 816–17, 828, 833, 837, 853, 856, 860, 862, 867
- Militant Group/Militants (Socialist Party of America) 764, 766, 768–69, 777–78, 790–91, 799, 801, 809–10, 815, 817, 822, 823, 828, 831, 837, 852–857, 859–60, 867–69, 871, 875–80, 882–83, 889–94, 896, 899–900, 905, 908, 914, 917, 928, 961, 1008–09, 1019–21, 1031
- Militant Labour League (Britain) 1134–35
- Milk Drivers' Union (Mineapolis) 560, 567, 585, 1052
- Mill, M. [Jacques Obin/Pavel Okun], see also Jewish Group 265, 272–74, 281–82
- miners xiii, 115, 161, 163, 166, 255, 291, 293, 302, 313, 403, 409–10, 414–60, 473, 727, 836, 1147
- Mini, Norman 759, 761, 775, 956
- Minneapolis (class relations, labor movement, etc.) 103–09, 520–35, 537–40, 542–53, 561, 568–73, 579–80, 588–601, 604–08, 610–21, 623–28, 644–52, 660–66, 669–70, 676–79, 691–96, 818, 1057–69, 1075–76
- Minneapolis Central Council of Workers [MCCW] 526, 548–49, 614, 615, 642, 650, 661, 666
- Minneapolis Central Labor Union [CLU] 535, 537, 524, 544–45, 553–57, 560, 575, 577, 612, 615, 618–19, 622, 638–39, 651, 654–55, 666, 692, 817, 862, 1053, 1055, 1066, 1076, 1151–52
- Minneapolis Labor Review* [1934], see also Robley D. Cramer 544, 554, 590, 606, 656–57, 677, 1069
- Minneapolis teamsters/truckers/ strikes 501, 522–23, 528, 533–37, 539, 542–43, 547, 549, 551–52, 554–56, 568, 566, 573, 575–77, 579, 582–85, 587, 589–93, 596, 598–99, 600–5, 608, 611–13, 618, 620–21, 623, 625–29, 631, 634, 638–39, 644–45, 650, 670, 675, 669, 673–75, 679, 705, 711, 739, 809, 814, 817–18, 862, 955–56, 1053–54, 1056–57, 1060, 1062, 1070, 1073, 1077, 1132, 1151
- Minneapolis Trotskyists 53, 84, 104–07, 108, 128, 208–09, 286, 307, 331, 385, 528–29, 534, 545–47, 558–59, 589, 600, 603, 602, 611, 613–14, 646, 693–95, 805, 822–23, 856, 861–866, 872, 902, 905–06, 921, 1052, 1056–57, 1059–60, 1062–63, 1072–73, 1146
- Modotti, Tina 981
- Modern Monthly* [1934–35] 726, 783, 965, 992, 1002, 1006
- Molinier, Raymond [Linier] 262–63, 265, 268, 270–73, 282, 697, 702, 704, 708–09, 716, 848, 894, 896, 1138
- Mooney, Tom (Congresses, Conferences, Defense Committees, Warren Billings) 24, 188, 291, 293, 313, 392–407, 412, 456, 529, 724, 750–51, 761, 954, 981
- Morgenstern, Bernard 98, 105, 238–39, 248, 282
- Morrow, Felix 492, 746, 759–60, 852, 857–58, 891–93, 897, 899, 904, 908, 952, 954, 956–57, 961, 963, 970–71, 974, 978–81, 995, 999–1000, 1003, 1006, 1009, 1013, 1017–1018, 1027, 1064, 1114, 1118, 1129
- Moscow Trials xiii, xvi, 902, 909, 916, 918, 926, 939, 949–51, 953, 958–59, 961–63, 966–68, 970–71, 974–75, 978–79, 983, 985, 990, 993–95, 1003–5, 1007–15, 1021–24, 1034–35, 993–95, 998–1001, 1003–06, 1008–10, 1012–15, 1021–24, 1027, 1031–32, 1035, 1044, 1067, 1069, 1071, 1073, 1104, 1119, 1126, 1134, 1139, 1147, 1149
- Muste, A.J. [Abraham Johannes], see also American Workers Party [AWP] xii, 376, 381, 398, 401, 407, 409, 411–12, 416, 420, 422, 433, 442, 451, 459, 478, 490, 512–13, 515–16, 691, 721–34, 744–46, 748–53, 757, 760–63, 765–66, 771, 776–80, 783–85, 789–90, 792–97, 800–812, 818–22, 824, 827–32, 838–51, 856, 859, 876, 882, 886, 956, 1019, 1078
- Musteites, 381, 409, 419, 422, 428, 432, 434, 451, 456, 459–60, 490, 494, 512–17, 710, 712, 721–22, 725–26, 728, 731, 733–38, 742–43, 746, 748–49, 759, 761, 767, 770, 772, 775, 779, 786–87, 793, 795, 800, 802, 804–06, 818–20, 824, 842–43, 880, 942, 944, 947–48, 1077, 1120, 1146

- National Action Committee, Left Opposition 139
- National Action Committee, Appeal Institute 923, 927
- National Action Committee, Socialist Party of America 914–15
- National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners [NCDPP], see also George Novack 954
- National Guard 319, 424, 425, 503, 510, 515, 573, 575–76, 578, 584, 588, 591, 593, 598, 600, 604, 606, 621, 627, 631, 634, 636, 642, 645–46, 649, 651–54, 656–59, 661, 664, 670, 675, 865
- National Industrial Recovery Act [NIRA] 316–17, 540
- National Maritime Union 1099, 1125, 1127
- National Miners Union [NMU] 115, 161, 410, 418, 427–28, 430
- National Textile Workers Union [NTWU] 164, 168, 408–09
- National Unemployed League [NUL] 725–26, 747, 800, 818–20, 837
- Naville, Pierre 260–67, 269, 271–74, 278, 282, 446, 702, 707, 716, 968, 1140
- Needle Trades Industrial Union 132–33
- 'Negro Question' 313, 338–41, 343–44, 346–47, 351–55, 358–59, 360, 362, 367, 375–76, 378–79, 755
- New Deal 315–18, 323, 381, 508, 515, 521, 523, 575, 577, 608, 612, 671, 1066
- New Leader* [1928, 1935] 648, 703, 900, 993
- New Masses* [1934–1936] 488, 493, 954–55, 958
- New Republic* [1931, 1934, 1937] 381, 515, 517, 552, 625, 958–59
- New York 7, 25–29, 45–50, 75–82, 88–9, 103, 105, 108, 113, 117, 126, 128, 141, 163, 181, 184, 188, 198–202, 205–10, 216, 218–222, 225–30, 236–37, 241–44, 248, 256, 276–78, 280, 282–83, 288–89, 296, 298–99, 313, 390–97, 407–11, 414, 421, 439, 445–46, 461–62, 464, 465–70, 472–74, 480, 492, 516–21, 591–92, 647–48, 713, 718–19, 738, 740, 743, 754, 757, 779–80, 785, 795, 801, 809, 812, 814, 818, 821, 855–59, 871–83, 886–94, 896–99, 901–03, 907–17, 920, 923–30, 931–32, 935, 943, 948–54, 959–60, 969, 977, 1000, 1007, 1013–14, 1087, 1022, 1034, 1037, 1039, 1081, 1087–88
- New York Times* 319, 334, 507, 727, 958–60, 969, 980, 989, 1006, 1022, 1127
- Nin, Andrés 21, 262, 272, 446, 1006, 1023–25, 1031
- Non-Partisan Labor Defense/Non-Partisan Defense League [NPLD] 491–93, 734, 750, 759–60, 812, 952, 955–57, 1055
- Non-Partisan League, see also Sidney Hillman 321–323
- Norris, W.W., see also Revolutionary Policy Committee [RPC] 743, 754
- Northwest Organizer/The Organizer* [1934–41] 506, 509, 560, 564–65, 609–14, 623, 624–25, 628, 636, 638, 641–43, 647–48, 650, 652, 657–58, 661–64, 667, 669, 671, 673–76, 684–686, 693, 761, 809, 862, 865, 955, 1053–54, 1056, 1063–64, 1066, 1073, 1151
- Novack, George 489–90, 746, 759, 897–98, 901, 952–57, 961–63, 967–69, 973–75, 978–80, 982–83, 985, 995, 999–1000, 1002–4, 1006–09, 1011, 1013–14, 1181, 1131
- Oehler, Hugo [James Young/"H"], see also Revolutionary Workers League [RWL] xiii, 92, 95, 165–68, 177, 201, 214, 232, 235, 242, 245–46, 252, 276, 285, 291, 294, 303, 314, 328, 330, 348, 355–59, 362–63, 366–67, 369, 374, 377, 380, 394, 397, 399, 401–3, 415–16, 433–40, 449–53, 455–56, 458–59, 473–74, 479–81, 484–86, 512, 614, 624, 656, 660, 706–07, 712, 714, 719, 731, 733, 735, 738–40, 742, 748–49, 753, 755–56, 765, 769–74, 777, 779–93, 795–98, 800–14, 819, 821, 832–33, 848, 942–43, 948, 956, 957, 983, 1019–20, 1137, 1146, 1148
- Oehlerites/Oehlerism 715, 719, 755, 771–72, 777, 779, 781–82, 785, 790, 787, 790, 796, 800–13, 823, 838, 853, 866, 957, 983
- O'Flaherty, Tom 102, 142, 185, 213, 217, 217–218, 233–34, 331
- Olson, Floyd Bjornstjerne (Minnesota Governor), see also Farmer-Labor Party [FLP] 524, 549, 550–51, 555, 557–58, 567, 572–79, 582–84, 586–89, 591–93, 597–99, 601–06, 608, 614, 618, 627, 630, 634–35,

- Olson, Floyd Bjornstjerne (Minnesota Governor), see also Farmer-Labor Party [FLP] (*cont.*) 637, 641–45, 649–53, 655–65, 667, 669, 671, 673, 674, 861
- One Big Union [OBU] 164
- one big union ideal 468, 620–21, 1040, 1051, 1078
- “organic unity” 701, 705, 707–14, 717–18, 745, 764, 771–72, 774, 779, 802, 810, 813, 822, 825–26, 831
- Orr, Lois 1025, 1125–26
- Paine, Lyman 1131
- Palmquist, Edward 1054
- Pappas, Sebastian 467–69
- Parsons, Albert 2, 44, 384
- Partisan Review* 964, 978, 995–97, 1006
- Passaic, New Jersey 211, 214–15, 219, 224
- Paterson, New Jersey 82, 408–09, 725, 745
- Pepper, John [Jozsef Pogány/Swift] 62, 65, 69, 74, 87, 99–100, 104, 106, 111, 134, 135, 137–38, 196, 217, 325–29, 333, 338–40, 345
- Pesotta, Rose 846
- Phelps, Christopher xvii, 339, 348, 359, 362, 364–65, 376, 377, 495, 729, 737, 754–55, 757, 798, 978
- Pollack, Sam 514, 726, 746, 750, 755, 818, 894, 1077
- police 79–81, 84, 86–87, 93–94, 423–24, 548–49, 572, 574–78, 580, 582–84, 631–33, 635–39, 1054–55, 1061
- political prisoners 529, 954–55, 963, 1131
- Popular Front/popular frontist xv, 11, 13–15, 20–22, 26, 30, 32, 40–41, 44, 322, 335, 336, 488, 490, 699–700, 704, 711, 764, 766, 780, 810, 815–16, 819, 825, 908–9, 912–13, 916–18, 924, 926, 932, 951–52, 974, 989, 1006, 1014–15, 1017–23, 1026, 1028–29, 1031, 1034, 1044, 1084, 1099, 1125, 1148
- Porter, Paul 908, 911, 913–14, 1020, 1024, 1118
- Postal, Kelly 501, 626, 642, 657
- Preis, Art 316, 514, 726, 746, 818, 894, 1062, 1077, 1121
- Prinkipo (Turkey) 207–08, 221, 258–59, 261–62, 265, 269–70, 284, 287, 347, 360, 362, 463, 466
- Progressive Miners of America [PMA] 402, 420–21, 424, 426–29, 431–32, 434–35, 437, 440–44, 447, 449, 453–61, 512, 559, 564, 726
- Proletarian Party 398, 753
- Querio, Ruth 834, 836
- race, see also African Americans, Black Belt Nation, ‘Negro Question’ 7, 15, 23, 31, 314, 82, 337, 339, 341–42, 347–53, 356–57, 359, 362–65, 369, 375–76, 767, 1041–43
- Radical Party (France) 699
- Rainbolt, Ray 626, 642, 657
- Ramuglia, Anthony 726, 746, 747, 750, 786, 800, 819–20, 828, 837, 880, 883, 897
- Red Army 41, 57, 293–99, 308, 444, 990
- Red International of Labor Unions, Fourth Congress 63
- Regional Labor Relations Board 483, 540–42, 544, 552–53, 578, 584–87, 603, 608, 613–14, 617, 619–20, 623, 635, 643, 672
- Reid, Tom 488
- Reiss, Ignace 1066
- Revolutionary Policy Committee [RPC, SP] 743, 766–69, 773, 775–76, 778, 791
- Revolutionary Policy Publication Association [RPPA, SP] 791–92, 799, 809, *New Leader* [1928, 1935], 648, 703, 900, 993
- Revolutionary Socialist Education Society [RSES], Militant Group/Left-Wing, Socialist Party of America 896, 898
- Revolutionary Socialist League [RSL], see also C.L.R. James 1134, 1136
- Revolutionary Socialist Party [RSP] (Edinburgh/Glasgow) 1134, 1138
- Revolutionary Socialist Party of Holland, see also Hendrik Sneevliet 698
- Revolutionary Workers League [RWL], see also Hugo Oehler 812, 866
- Rivera, Diego 156, 467, 493, 953, 981, 984, 992, 995–96, 1110
- Robertson, James/Jim 851
- Roosevelt, Franklin Delano 21, 315–17, 322–23, 380, 513, 516, 521, 575, 605, 647, 671, 719, 823, 860–61, 900
- Roskolenko, Harry [Harry Ross] 90–91, 94–95, 200, 477, 485, 777, 835, 940–41, 1122

- Rosmer, Alfred 130, 261–65, 271, 273–74, 282, 446, 697, 981, 1001, 1139
- Ross, Edward A. 981
- Ross, Jack 766, 886, 935, 1010
- Ross, Walta Karsner (Cannon step-daughter) 181–82, 185, 189, 196, 874, 1145
- Sailors Union, of the Pacific [SUP] 884, 887, 907, 1034–36, 1039–40, 1044–46, 1050, 1107, 1109, 1127
- Saul, George J. 90, 166–68, 177, 241, 354–55
- Save The Union Movement (miners) 115, 161, 415
- Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière/Socialist Party of France (SFIO) 699, 700–8, 715–18, 722, 772, 774, 779, 810, 816, 1015
- Selander, Ted [Ted Grant] 514–15, 726, 746, 787, 789, 792–95, 806, 818–20, 834, 836, 841, 880, 882–83, 892, 894, 896, 926, 1077, 1080, 1083, 1121
- Shachtman, Max xiii, xvi, 1, 33, 46–49, 51–52, 65–76, 129, 146, 148, 153, 155–57, 180, 192–97, 199–211, 222–39, 241–67, 269–87, 289–300, 302–10, 314, 329–40, 359, 362, 367–73, 374, 377, 396–97, 403, 433, 437, 444–52, 461, 463, 500, 530, 592, 648–51, 706–07, 709, 714, 720, 728, 731–39, 749, 762–63, 797–809, 814, 816, 828–34, 838–42, 856, 879, 911–912, 915, 924, 935, 946, 952–53, 962, 973–74, 1012, 1114–16, 1124, 1126, 1142, 1157–58
- Skoglund, Carl/Karl 84, 106, 107, 141, 153, 237, 242, 246–47, 258, 286, 385, 501, 525–26, 529–30, 534–46, 552–55, 558–59, 561–63, 574, 582–84, 588, 591–92, 596–97, 604, 614, 617, 622–24, 627, 637, 642, 652, 669–71, 706, 712, 773, 817, 821–23, 828, 866, 1057–60, 1062–63, 1076, 1129, 1146, 1151
- “social fascism” 22–24, 171, 330, 380, 701
- “socialism in one country” xi, xv, 3, 7–8, 14–15, 25, 36, 38–39, 41, 52, 57, 62, 65, 91, 96, 113, 125–26, 131, 136, 296, 301, 308, 312, 443, 494, 989, 1146, 1148
- Socialist Appeal* [1937–39] 125, 688–90, 774, 840, 845, 853, 855–56, 866, 888, 891, 894–96, 898, 903, 909–10, 914–15, 922–23, 925–33, 939, 962, 995–98, 1002–8, 1015–18, 1020–21, 1031–34, 1061–62, 1064, 1068–76, 1088–94, 1097–98, 1119–21, 1123–27, 1130–32, 1141–44, 1160–61
- Socialist Labor Party [SLP] 422, 1134
- Socialist Party of America [SP], see also entrism/entryism 201, 340, 386–389, 487, 495, 703, 720–21, 710–711, 718, 726, 743, 763–61, 764–65, 767–69, 773–79, 784, 786, 778, 794–95, 798–802, 806, 812–16, 818, 820, 822, 825–34, 836–41, 844–49, 851–59, 860–72, 886, 894, 896–901, 903–42, 944, 947–48, 957, 974, 1008–15, 1017, 1020, 1030–34, 1038, 1078, 1081, 1084, 1088, 1093, 1120, 1125–26, 1132, 1137, 1141, 1144
- Socialist Workers Party (Germany) 698
- Socialist Workers Party [SWP/USA] xiii–xiv, xvi, 9, 21, 26, 49, 333, 378, 484, 527, 786, 1042, 1098, 1100, 1114, 1116, 1121, 1124–25, 1127–28, 1140, 1143–44, 1148–52
- Soderberg, John/Jack, see also Independent Tidewater Boatmens' Union [ITBU] 411–14, 1034
- Soderberg, Martin 537
- Solow, Herbert [Harry Strang] 476, 487–92, 612–14, 625, 648, 668–69, 679, 734, 746, 759, 775–76, 812–13, 952, 954–57, 961, 963, 975, 979, 982–83, 985, 988, 992, 995, 1002–03, 1006, 1009
- Sneevliet, Hendrik 698
- Soviet Union xi–xii, 3, 5, 8–9, 14–21, 23, 35–36, 38, 40–42, 51–52, 54–56, 58, 67–68, 74, 79, 97, 101, 111, 115, 119, 123, 126, 168, 172, 176, 282, 294–96, 298, 301, 308, 342, 380, 383, 388, 412, 494, 698, 704, 736, 750, 760, 816, 837, 949–52, 955, 958, 960–62, 964–65, 972, 974, 978–79, 982, 985–86, 989, 994, 1000, 1002, 1004, 1006, 1008, 1012, 1026, 1069, 1088, 1121–23, 1125–26, 1128, 1141–42, 1149–50
- Spain 6, 21, 242, 252, 260, 272–73, 446, 464, 849, 897–98, 909, 917, 920, 924–26, 946, 1014–36, 1071, 1086, 1106, 1125, 1128, 1139, 1149
- Spanish Civil War/Revolution xi, 39, 42, 131, 203, 272, 488, 928, 939, 946, 951, 1014–1017, 1022–27, 1032–35, 1099, 1105, 1119, 1125, 1147

- Spartacus Youth League [SYL] 816, 839, 843–44, 930
- Spector, Maurice 58–61, 69, 71, 73, 85, 88–89, 101, 107–15, 120–22, 123, 125–31, 140–43, 145, 148, 153, 158, 169, 171–73, 178, 192, 195–97, 199, 201–09, 213, 229–32, 241–43, 247, 251–53, 257–59, 262, 267, 269, 274–76, 278–83, 289, 290, 304, 309, 438, 487–88, 529, 706–07, 711–14, 719, 731, 738–39, 741–42, 762, 765, 773, 785, 829–30, 833, 842–47, 875–77, 881, 885, 889, 926, 928, 932, 944, 947, 1008, 1027
- Stalin, Joseph (Stalinism/Stalinization) xii, 5–12, 14–16, 17–19, 23–26, 29–30, 35–44, 56–57, 64, 72, 80–82, 86, 89, 96–100, 104, 108, 116, 119, 124, 131, 133, 137–39, 170–76, 215, 230, 297, 299–302, 343, 365, 377, 394, 404, 410–11, 427, 468–69, 489, 491, 661, 704, 760, 795, 827, 942, 948–51, 967, 985, 982, 989–91, 994–98, 1000, 1003, 1005–7, 1012–13, 1029, 1045, 1053, 1063, 1071–72, 1099, 1119–22
- Stalinophobia 1099–1100
- Stamm, Tom 95, 226, 237, 296, 354, 394–99, 402–4, 755–56, 765, 779–83, 787–89, 791–92, 796–97, 802, 804, 809–12, 943, 948, 1146, 1148
- Stolberg, Benjamin 960, 973, 980–82, 988, 995, 998–1001, 1006, 1012, 1044
- Storch, Randi 11–13, 23–24, 26–31, 35, 93
- Strutwear Hosiery Strike (Minneapolis) 817–818, 1054–55
- Swabeck, Arne 27–28, 55, 64, 69, 74, 85–86, 88, 92–93, 103–08, 116, 118, 129, 136–37, 139, 141–43, 151, 153, 156, 161, 179, 189, 191–92, 196, 204–9, 212, 220, 223, 225–33, 232–33, 239, 242–53, 258–59, 275, 278, 280, 284, 286–93, 296, 298, 302, 306, 314, 329–33, 335, 359–63, 366–67, 371–72, 395, 400, 402, 404, 415, 428, 430, 437–38, 443, 5, 447, 451–52, 458, 472–73, 512, 539, 536, 648, 706–07, 711–15, 719, 731–45, 750, 762–63, 771, 778, 785, 787, 790–91, 799, 806, 808, 814, 816, 822, 824, 828, 830, 838, 845–46, 852, 857, 873–76, 879–83, 887–94, 896, 898–99, 901, 903–7, 909, 913, 920, 926, 944–45, 1027, 1030, 1036, 1039, 1078–79
- Swabeck, Edgar 156
- Swabeck, Hildegard 874, 876
- Symes, Lillian, *see also* Clarity Group/Clarity-ites 886, 1008, 1021, 1048
- syndicalism 129, 131, 201, 221, 257–58, 268–69, 446, 1026, 1035, 1049
- teamsters/truckers 509, 518, 520–21, 526–28, 531–37, 542, 545, 551–53, 558, 570–72, 581, 585, 589, 594, 596, 598–601, 603–07, 617–18, 620, 623, 630, 642, 676, 1055, 1059–60, 1064, 1066
- textile workers 214, 319, 519, 624
- Third Period xv, 6–8, 14–15, 20, 22–23, 25, 27, 30, 39–40, 44, 91, 94, 143, 166–67, 169–74, 176, 204, 213, 216, 272, 301, 304, 310, 330, 338, 349, 374, 380–83, 385, 387, 393, 400, 408, 410, 418, 421, 427, 452, 458, 469, 488, 490–91, 494, 508, 509, 513, 528, 599, 601, 631, 693, 696, 700, 704, 711, 723, 745, 759, 764, 780–81, 819, 905, 954, 1148
- Thomas, Norman 381, 432, 440, 451, 763, 768, 777–78, 786, 794–95, 799, 815, 822, 829, 831, 846, 852, 854, 858–59, 868–69, 899–900, 903–4, 908–9, 914–16, 918, 920, 924, 926–28, 931–37, 957, 960–63, 965, 969, 973, 976–77, 1008, 1010–11, 1014, 1019–21, 1033, 1101–2, 1117–18
- Thompson, Edward Palmer [E.P.] 34
- Tobin, Dan, *see also* International Brotherhood of Teamsters Union 538–39, 545–47, 552–54, 557, 586, 601, 607–8, 612, 617–24, 636, 639, 644, 669, 692, 694, 781, 817, 862, 872–73, 1053, 1055–62, 1068, 1073, 1151
- Toledo, Ohio, *see also* Electric Auto-Lite Strike 515, 691, 786, 806, 818, 829, 834, 836, 841, 882, 886, 892, 898, 1077, 1086
- Toronto, Canada 29, 59, 85, 111–14, 126, 130, 169, 178, 192, 195–96, 203–05, 208–09, 213, 229, 241–43, 251, 280–81, 304, 361, 391, 438, 487, 493, 711, 741, 829, 928, 1008
- Trade Union Unity League [TUUL] 31, 393, 398, 418–19, 445, 467, 474, 487, 526, 611
- Trajer, William 411–13
- Transitional Program xvi, 336, 604, 677, 1124, 1128–29, 1137, 1140–41

- Trimble, Glen 880, 886, 889, 891, 893, 903–5, 921, 926–29, 931, 984, 1014, 1017, 1038, 1048, 1050, 1117, 1127, 1131
- Trimble, Crary 1120
- Trotsky, Leon 1, 15, 39–41, 47, 50, 52, 54–55, 59, 61, 63–64, 67, 72, 77, 96, 99–104, 118–19, 125–135, 162, 172, 220–23, 252, 254–80, 287–94, 299, 329–36, 360–63, 400, 420, 449, 463–67, 477, 604, 697–712, 715, 730, 732, 749, 765, 777, 813, 827–33, 847, 917–18, 924, 933, 938, 947–71, 972–1014, 1070, 1118, 1126–46
- Tyler, Gus 853, 875, 881, 892–93, 900, 901, 904–05, 908, 910, 914, 917–18, 924, 926–29, 933, 1013, 1020–21, 1032–33, 1119
- Uhlmann, Jennifer R. 34
- unemployment 79, 92, 131, 136, 158, 184, 238, 315, 375, 380–82, 386–92, 395, 423, 442, 529, 548–49, 609, 615, 724–25, 757, 860, 900, 1084
- Unemployed Leagues (American Workers Party) 381, 459, 516, 555, 750–54
- unemployed movements (conferences, organizations, mobilizations), see also Unemployed Leagues and Federal Workers Section 82, 381–87, 390–92, 436, 453, 455, 512, 529, 548, 609, 819–20, 905, 1053, 1119
- Union Defense Guard (Minneapolis) 602
- union recognition 164, 507, 516, 544, 547, 566, 586, 594–95, 611, 673, 1046, 1055
- united front 20, 22, 93–94, 216, 294–95, 382–84, 386–94, 398–403, 406, 408–9, 430, 489–90, 700–701, 718, 770
- United Auto Workers [UAW] 695, 1078–1085, 1088–98, 1143
- Urtubees, A.H. 615
- van Heijenoort, Jean 155, 261–62, 982
- Veereken, Georges 848, 1130
- Venkataramani, M.S. 827, 832, 854, 1010
- Wald, Alan xvii, 32, 50, 488, 490, 776, 812, 997
- Walker, Charles Rumford 520, 523–24, 527–28, 532, 542, 568–69, 571, 600, 607, 611, 628, 635, 640, 643, 646–47, 654, 656, 660, 664, 675, 982–83
- Walker, John A. [“Weeping Jack”] 416, 419, 422, 424
- Weber, Hermann 15, 23, 25, 38
- Weber, Jack [Louis Jacobs], also Weberism/Weberites, Muste-Weber Group 437, 446, 707–08, 711–15, 738–39, 763, 771–74, 778–79, 785–87, 790, 800–06, 810, 819, 821–822, 824, 827, 828–33, 838–39, 842–45, 942, 1020, 1037–38
- Weir, Roy 615, 656
- Weisbord, Albert, also Weisbord Group, and see also Communist League of Struggle/*Class Struggle* [1931–35] 165–66, 168, 211–26, 234, 241, 251, 256, 269, 366, 460, 464–65, 487, 739
- Weisbord, Vera Buch 165, 215–16, 221
- Wicks, Harry/Ad-Hoc Committee of the Marxist League 1134, 1138
- Widick, B.J. 33, 849, 1042, 1097, 1121, 1125, 1130
- Williamson, Simon 376–78, 754–59, 797–98, 941
- Winnipeg General Strike 39, 410, 571–72, 1176, 1182
- Wolfe, Bernard 982–83, 1001–02
- Wolfe, Bertram D. 51, 72, 74, 99, 106, 133, 974
- Women's/Ladies' Auxiliary, General Drivers' Union (Minneapolis) 502, 559–67, 569, 576, 578, 609, 615–16, 626, 630, 635–36, 640, 643, 650, 653, 659, 664
- Workers' Defense Guards 5, 76, 79, 80, 83, 85, 87–88, 93, 602, 625, 1131
- Workers Party 748–55, 759–61, 763–64, 774–77, 779–83, 785–96, 798–800, 802–6, 809–12, 818–33, 835–39, 843–49, 855, 866–72, 910–13, 956–57
- Works Progress Administration [WPA] strike, Minneapolis 1939, 1054
- Wright, John G. [Joseph Vanzler/Usick] 376–78, 836, 887, 911, 1118
- Young Communist League [YCL, Young Workers League/YWL] 28, 79, 81, 104, 110, 112, 228, 391, 395, 1077
- Young People's Socialist League (YPSL) 445, 764–66, 769, 773–75, 799, 815, 825–26, 829, 831, 846, 855, 870, 874–75, 896, 928–31, 933, 938, 948, 968, 1008, 1017, 1033, 1087, 1120, 1133

- Zack, Joseph [Kornfeder] 743, 780–85, 787–91, 798, 803, 806–07, 941
908–11, 914, 917, 924, 926–28, 930, 933, 981, 1014, 1020, 1021, 1025, 1032–33
- Zam, Herbert, see also Clarity Group/Clarity-ites 742–43, 765, 799, 837, 852–53, 858, 868, 875–82, 889–92, 898, 900–01, 906, Zumoff, Jacob xvi, 7, 341, 743, 810, 872, 936